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JACK LONDON'S

Man-and-dog classic

TO BUILD A FIRE

ROBERT SERVICE

LES SAVAGE, Jr.

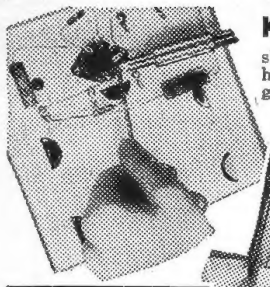
The

CAPTIVE

They baited the Mountie with a wolverine girl

Novelet by DAN CUSHMAN

FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINES



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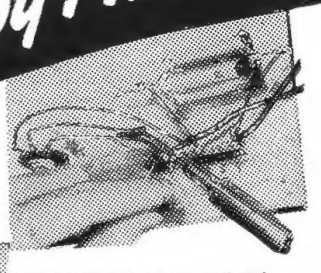

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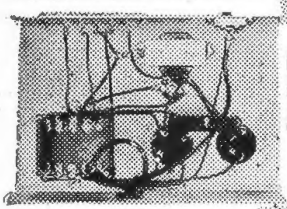

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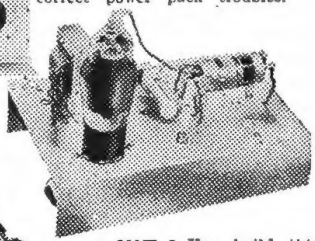

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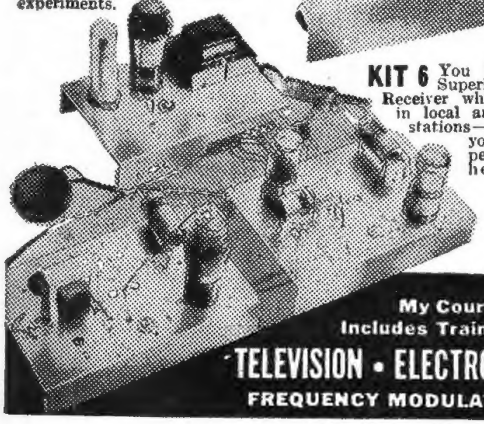

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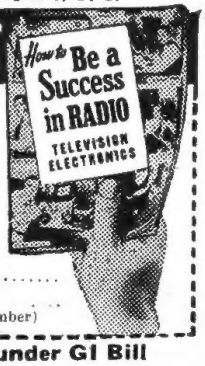

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(NOV.-JAN.)

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A SNOWLAND CLASSIC

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WALTER GALLI

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- What they really dream about
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- Their two-penny tricks
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- Their refusal to accept rejection
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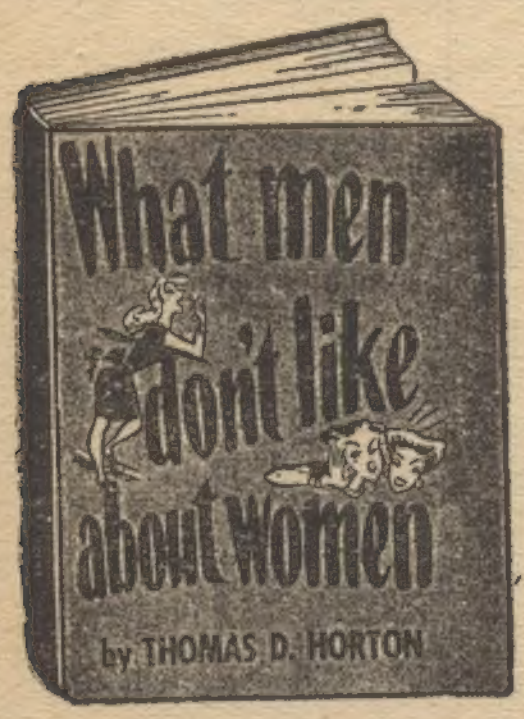

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TO BUILD A FIRE

By JACK LONDON

"Don't travel alone in the Klondike after 50 below," runs the Northland warning. Yet the foolhardy chechaquo tackled the big test—75 below—and reaped an ice-clad jackpot.

DAY HAD BROKEN cold and gray, exceedingly cold and gray, when the man turned aside from the main Yukon trail and climbed the high earth-bank, where a dim and little-traveled trail led eastward through the fat spruce timberland. It was a steep bank, and he paused for breath at the top, excusing the act to himself by looking at his watch. It was nine o'clock. There was no sun nor hint of sun, though there was not a cloud in the sky.

It was a clear day, and yet there seemed an intangible pall over the face of things, a subtle gloom that made the day dark, and that was due to the absence of sun. This fact did not worry the man. He was used to the lack of sun. It had been days since he had seen the sun, and he knew that a few more days must pass before that cheerful orb, due south, would just peep above the sky line and dip immediately from view.

The man flung a look back along the way he had come. The Yukon lay a mile wide and hidden under three feet of ice. On top of this ice were as many feet of snow. It was all pure white, rolling in gentle undulations where the ice jams of the freeze-up had formed. North and south, as far as his eye could see, it was unbroken white, save for a dark hairline that curved and twisted from around the spruce-covered island to the south, and that curved and twisted away into the north, where it disappeared behind another spruce-covered island.

This dark hairline was the trail—the main trail—that led south five hundred miles to the Chilkoot Pass, Dyea, and salt water; and that led north seventy miles to Dawson, and still on to the north a thousand miles to Nulato, and finally to St. Michael, on Bering Sea, a thousand miles and half a thousand more.

But all this—the mysterious, far-reaching hairline trail, the absence of sun from the sky, the tremendous cold, and the strangeness and weirdness of it all—made no impression on the man. It was not because he was long used to it. He was a newcomer in the land, a *chechaquo,* and this was his first winter. The trouble with him was that he was without imagination. He was quick and alert in the things of life, but only in the things, and not in the significances. Fifty degrees below zero meant eighty-odd degrees of frost. Such fact impressed him as being cold and uncomfortable, and that was all. It did not lead him to meditate upon his frailty as a creature of temperature, and upon man's frailty in general, able only to live within certin narrow limits of heat and cold; and from there on it did not lead him to the conjectural field of immortality and man's place in the universe.

Fifty degrees below zero stood for a bite of frost that hurt and that must be guarded against by the use of mittens, ear flaps, warm moccasins, and thick socks. Fifty degrees below zero was to him just precisely fifty degrees below zero. That there should be anything more to it than that was a thought that never entered his head.

As he turned to go on, he spat speculatively. There was a sharp, explosive crackle that startled him. He spat again. And again, in the air, before it could fall to the snow, the spittle crackled. He knew that at fifty below spittle crackle on the snow, but this spittle had crackled in the air. Undoubtedly it was colder than fifty below—how much colder he did not know. But the temperature did not matter. He was bound for the old claim on the left fork of Henderson Creek, where the boys were already.

They had come over across the divide

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from the Indian Creek country, while he had come the roundabout way to take a look at the possibilities of getting out logs in the spring from the islands in the Yukon. He would be in to camp by six o'clock; a bit after dark, it was true, but the boys would be there, a fire would be going, and a hot supper would be ready. As for lunch, he pressed his hand against the protruding bundle under his jacket. It was also under his shirt, wrapped up in a handkerchief and lying against the naked skin. It was the only way to keep the biscuits from freezing. He smiled agreeably to himself as he thought of those biscuits, each cut open and sopped in bacon grease, and each enclosing a generous slice of fried bacon.

He plunged in among the big spruce trees. The trail was faint. A foot of snow had fallen since the last sled had passed over, and he was glad he was without a sled, traveling light. In fact, he carried nothing but the lunch wrapped in the handkerchief. He was surprised, however, at the cold. It certainly was cold, he concluded, as he rubbed his numb nose and cheekbones with his mittened hand. He was a warm-whiskered man, but the hair on his face did not protect the high cheekbones and the eager nose that thrust itself aggresively into the frosty air.

At the man's heels trotted a dog, a big native husky, the proper wolf dog, gray-coated and without any visible or temperamental difference from its brother, the wild wolf. The animal was depressed by the tremendous cold. It knew that it was no time for traveling. Its instinct told it a truer tale than was told to the man by the man's judgment. In reality, it was not merely colder than fifty below zero; it was colder than sixty below, than seventy below. It was seventy-five below zero.

The wolf-dog snarled, for in the man's voice was a strange note of fear that frightened the animal.

Since the freezing point is thirty-two above zero, it meant that one hundred and seven degrees of frost obtained. The dog did not know anything about thermometers. Possibly in its brain there was no sharp consciousness of a condition of very cold such as was in the man's brain. But the brute had its instinct.

It experienced a vague but menacing apprehension that subdued it and made it slink along at the man's heels, and that made it question eagerly every unwonted movement of the man as if expecting him to go into camp or to seek shelter somewhere and build a fire. The dog had learned fire, and it wanted fire, or else to burrow under the snow and cuddle its warmth away from the air.

The frozen moisture of its breathing had settled on its fur in a fine powder of frost, and especially were its jowls, muzzle, and eyelashes whitened by its crystalled breath. The man's red beard and mustache were likewise frosted, but more solidly, the deposit taking the form of ice and increasing with every warm, moist breath he exhaled. Also, the man was chewing tobacco, and the muzzle of ice held his lips so rigidly that he was unable to clear his chin when he expelled the juice.

The result was that a crystal beard of the color and solidity of amber was increasing its length on his chin.

If he fell down it would shatter itself, like glass, into brittle fragments. But he did not mind the appendage.

It was the penalty all tobacco chewers paid in that country, and he had been out before in two cold snaps. They had not been so cold as this, he knew, but by the spirit thermometer at Sixty Mile he knew they had been registered at fifty below and at fifty-five.

He held on through the level stretch of woods for several miles, crossed a wide flat of nigger heads, and dropped down a bank to the frozen bed of a small stream. This was Henderson Creek, and he knew he was ten miles from the forks. He looked at his watch. It was ten o'clock. He was making four miles an hour, and he calculated that he would arrive at the forks at half-past twelve. He decided to celebrate that event by eating his lunch there.

The dog dropped in again at his heels, with a tail drooping discouragement, as the man swung along the creek bed. The furrow of the old sled trail was plainly visible, but a dozen inches of snow covered the marks of the last runners. In a month no man had come up or down that silent creek. The man held steadily on. He was not much given to thinking, and just then particularly he had nothing to think about save that he would eat lunch at the forks and that at six o'clock he would be in camp with the boys. There was nobody to talk to; and, had there been, speech would have been impossible because of the ice muzzle on his mouth. So he continued monotonously to chew tobacco and to increase the length of his amber beard.

Once in a while the thought reiterated itself that it was very cold and that he had never experienced such cold. As he walked along he rubbed his cheekbones and nose with the back of his mittened hand. He did this automatically, now and again changing hands. But, rub as he would, the instant he stopped his cheekbones went numb, and the following instant the end of his nose went numb. He was sure to frost his cheeks; he knew that, and experienced a pang of regret that he had not devised a nose strap of the sort Bud wore in cold snaps. Such a strap passed across the cheeks, as well, and saved them. But it didn't matter much, after all. What were frosted cheeks? A bit painful, that was all; they were never serious.

Empty as the man's mind was of thoughts, he was keenly observant, and he noticed the changes in the creek, the curves and bends and timber jams, and always he sharply noted where he placed his feet. Once, coming around a bend, he shied abruptly, like a startled horse, curved away from the place where he had been walking, and retreated several paces back along the trail.

The creek he knew was frozen clear to the bottom—no creek could contain water in that arctic winter—but he knew also that there were springs that bubbled out from the hillsides and ran along under the snow and on top the ice of the creek. He knew that the coldest snaps never froze these springs, and he knew likewise their

danger. They were traps. They hid pools of water under the snow that might be three inches deep, or three feet. Sometimes a skin of ice half an inch thick covered them, and in turn was covered by the snow. Sometimes there were alternate layers of water and ice skin, so that when one broke through he kept on breaking through for a while, sometimes wetting himself to the waist.

That was why he had shied in such panic. He had felt the give under his feet and heard the crackle of a snow-hidden ice skin. And to get his feet wet in such a temperature meant trouble and danger. At the very least it meant delay, for he would be forced to stop and build a fire, and under its protection to bare his feet while he dried his socks and moccasins. He stood and studied the creek bed and its banks, and decided that the flow of water came from the right. He reflected awhile, rubbing his nose and cheeks, then skirted to the left, stepping gingerly and testing the footing for each step. Once clear of the danger, he took a fresh chew of tobacco and swung along at his four-mile gait.

In the course of the next two hours he came upon several similar traps. Usually the snow above the hidden pools had a sunken, candied appearance that advertised the danger. Once again, however, he had a close call; and once, suspecting danger, he compelled the dog to go on in front. The dog did not want to go. It hung back until the man shoved it forward, and then it went quickly across the white, unbroken surface. Suddenly it broke through, floundered to one side, and got away to firmer footing. It had wet its forefeet and legs, and almost immediately the water that clung to it turned to ice.

It made quick efforts to lick the ice off its legs, then dropped down in the snow and began to bite out the ice that had formed between the toes. This was a matter of instinct. To permit the ice to remain would mean sore feet. It did not know this. It merely obeyed the mysterious prompting that arose from the deep crypts of its being. But the man knew, having achieved a judgment on the subject, and he removed the mitten from his right hand and helped tear out the ice particles. He did not expose his fingers more than a minute, and was astonished at the swift numbness that smote them. It certainly was cold. He pulled on the mitten hastily, and beat the hand savagely across his chest.

At twelve o'clock the day was at its brightest. Yet the sun was too far south on its winter journey to clear the horizon. The bulge of the earth intervened between it and Henderson Creek, where the man walked under a clear sky at noon and cast no shadow. At half-past twelve, to the minute, he arrived at the forks of the creek. He was pleased at the speed he had made. If he kept it up, he would certainly be with the boys by six. He unbuttoned his jacket and shirt and drew forth his lunch. The action consumed no more than a quarter of a minute, yet in that brief moment the numbness laid hold of the exposed fingers.

He did not put the mitten on, but, instead, struck the fingers a dozen sharp smashes against his leg. Then he sat down on a snow-covered log to eat. The sting that followed upon the striking of his fingers against his leg ceased so quickly that he was startled. He had had no chance to take a bite of biscuit. He struck the fingers repeatedly and returned them to the mitten, baring the other hand for the purpose of eating. He tried to take a mouthful, but the ice muzzle prevented. He had forgotten to build a fire and thaw out. He chuckled at his foolishness, and as he chuckled he noted the numbness creeping into the exposed fingers. Also, he noted that the stinging which had first come to his toes when he sat down was already passing away. He wondered whether the toes were warm or numb. He moved them inside the moccasins and decided that they were numb.

He pulled the mitten on hurriedly and stood up. He was a bit frightened. He stamped up and down until the stinging returned into the feet. It certainly was cold, was his thought. That man from Sulphur Creek had spoken the truth when telling how cold it sometimes got in the country. And he had laughed at him at the time! That showed one must not be too sure of things. There was no mistake about it, it *was* cold.

He strode up and down, stamping his feet and threshing his arms, until reassured by the returning warmth. Then he got out matches and proceeded to make a

fire. From the undergrowth, where high water of the previous spring had lodged a supply of seasoned twigs, he got his firewood. Working carefully from a small beginning, he soon had a roaring fire, over which he thawed the ice from his face and in the protection of which he ate his biscuits. For the moment the cold of space was outwitted. The dog took satisfaction in the fire, stretching out close enough for warmth and far enough away to escape being singed.

When the man had finished, he filled his pipe and took his comfortable time over a smoke. Then he pulled on his mittens, settled the ear flaps of his cap firmly about his ears, and took the creek trail up the left fork. The dog was disappointed and yearned back toward the fire. This man did not know cold. Possibly all the generations of his ancestry had been ignorant of cold, of real cold, of cold one hundred and seven degrees below freezing point. But the dog knew; all its ancestry knew, and it had inherited the knowledge. And it knew that it was not good to walk abroad in such fearful cold. It was the time to lie snug in a hole in the snow and wait for a curtain of cloud to be drawn across the face of outer space whence this cold came.

On the other hand, there was no keen intimacy between the dog and the man. The one was the toil slave of the other, and the only caresses it had ever received were the caresses of the whip lash and of harsh and menacing throat sounds that threatened the whip lash. So the dog made no effort to communicate its apprehension to the man. It was not concerned in the welfare of the man; it was for its own sake that it yearned back toward the fire. But the man whistled, and spoke to it with the sound of whip lashes, and the dog swung in at the man's heels and followed after.

The man took a chew of tobacco and proceeded to start a new amber beard. Also, his moist breath quickly powdered with white his mustache, eyebrows, and lashes. There did not seem to be so many springs on the left fork of the Henderson, and for half an hour the man saw no signs of any. And then it happened. At a place where there were no signs, where the soft, unbroken snow seemed to advertise solidity beneath, the man broke through. It was not deep. He wet himself halfway to the knees before he floundered out to the firm crust.

He was angry, and cursed his luck aloud. He had hoped to get into camp with the boys at six o'clock, and this would delay him an hour, for he would have to build a fire and dry out his footgear. This was imperative at that low temperature —he knew that much; and he turned aside to the bank, which he climbed. On top, tangled in the underbrush about the trunks of several small spruce trees, was a high-water deposit of dry firewood—sticks and twigs, principally, but also larger portions of seasoned branches and fine, dry, last year's grasses. He threw down several large pieces on top of the snow.

This served for a foundation and prevented the young flame from drowning itself in the snow it otherwise would melt. The flame he got by touching a match to a small shred of birch bark that he took from his pocket. This burned even more readily than paper. Placing it on the foundation, he fed the young flame with wisps of dry grass and with the tiniest dry twigs.

He worked slowly and carefully, keenly aware of his danger. Gradually, as the flame grew stronger, he increased the size of the twigs with which he fed it. He squatted in the snow, pulling the twigs out from their entanglement in the brush and feeding directly to the flame. He knew there must be no failure. When it is seventy-five below zero, a man must not fail in his first attempt to build a fire—that is, if his feet are wet. If his feet are dry, and he fails, he can run along the trail for half a mile and restore this circulation. But the circulation of wet and freezing feet cannot be restored by running when it is seventy-five below. No matter how fast he runs, the wet feet will freeze the harder.

All this the man knew. The old-timer on Sulphur Creek had told him about it the previous fall, and now he was appreciating the advice. Already all sensation had gone out of his feet. To build the fire he had been forced to remove his mittens, and the fingers had quickly gone numb. His pace of four miles an hour had kept his heart pumping blood to the surface of his body and to all the extremities.

But the instant he stopped, the action of the pump eased down. The cold of space smote the unprotected tip of the planet, and he, being on that unprotected tip, received the full force of the blow. The blood of his body recoiled before it. The blood was alive, like the dog, and like the dog it wanted to hide away and cover itself up from the fearful cold. So long as he walked four miles an hour, he pumped that blood, willy-nilly, to the surface; but now it ebbed away and sank down into the recesses of his body. The extremities were the first to feel its absence. His wet feet froze the faster, and his exposed fingers numbed the faster, though they had not yet begun to freeze.

Nose and cheeks were already freezing, while the skin of all his body chilled as it lost its blood.

But he was safe. Toes and nose and cheeks would be only touched by the frost, for the fire was beginning to burn with strength. He was feeding it with twigs the size of his finger. In another minute he would be able to feed it with branches the size of his wrist, and then he could remove his wet footgear, and, while it dried, he could keep his naked feet warm by the fire, rubbing them at first, of course, with snow. The fire was a success. He was safe. He remembered the advice of the old-timer on Sulphur Creek, and smiled. The old-timer had been very serious in laying down the law that no man must travel alone in the Klondike after fifty below. Well, here he was; he had had the accident; he was alone; and he had saved himself.

Those old-timers were rather womanish, some of them, he thought. All a man had to do was to keep his head, and he was all right. Any man who was a man could travel alone. But it was surprising, the rapidity with which his cheeks and nose were freezing. And he had not thought his fingers could go lifeless in so short a time. Lifeless they were, for he could scarcely make them move together to grip a twig, and they seemed remote from his body and from him. When he touched a twig, he had to look and see whether or not he had hold of it. The wires were pretty well down between him and his finger ends.

All of which counted for little. There was the fire, snapping and crackling and promising life with every dancing flame. He started to untie his moccasins. They were coated with ice; the thick German socks were like sheaths of iron halfway to the knees; and the moccasin strings were like rods of steel all twisted and knotted as by some conflagration. For a moment he tugged with his numbed fingers, then, realizing the folly of it, he drew his sheath knife.

But before he could cut the strings, it happened. It was his own fault or, rather, his mistake. He should not have built the fire under the spruce tree. He should have built it in the open. But it had been easier to pull the twigs from the brush and drop them directly on the fire. Now the tree under which he had done this carried a weight of snow on its boughs. No wind had blown for weeks, and each bough was fully freighted. Each time he had pulled a twig he had communicated a slight agitation to the tree—an imperceptible agitation, so far as he was concerned, but an agitation sufficient to bring about the disaster. High up in the tree one bough capsized its load of snow. This fell on the boughs beneath, capsizing them. This process continued, spreading out and involving the whole tree. It grew like an avalanche, and it descended without warning upon the man and the fire, and the fire was blotted out! Where it had burned was a mantle of fresh and disordered snow.

The man was shocked. It was as though he had just heard his own sentence of death. For a moment he sat and stared at the spot where the fire had been. Then he grew very calm. Perhaps the old-timer on Sulphur Creek was right. If he had only had a trail mate he would have been in no danger now. The trail mate would have built the fire. Well, it was up to him to build the fire over again, and this second time there must be no failure. Even if he succeeded, he would most likely lose some toes. His feet must be badly frozen by now, and there would be some time before the second fire was ready.

Such were his thoughts, but he did not sit and think them. He was busy all the time they were passing through his mind. He made a new foundation for a fire, this time in the open, where no treacherous tree could blot it out. Next he gathered

dry grasses and tiny twigs from the high-water flotsam. He could not bring his fingers together to pull them out, but he was able to gather them by the handful. In this way he got many rotten twigs and bits of green moss that were undesirable, but it was the best he could do. He worked methodically, even collecting an armful of the larger branches to be used later when the fire gathered strength. And all the while the dog sat and watched him, a certain yearning wistfulness in its eyes, for it looked upon him as the fire provider, and the fire was slow in coming.

When all was ready, the man reached in his pocket for a second piece of birch bark. He knew the bark was there, and, though he could not feel it with his fingers, he could hear its crisp rustling as he fumbled for it. Try as he would, he could not clutch hold of it. And all the time, in his consciousness, was the knowledge that each instant his feet were freezing. This thought tended to put him in a panic, but he fought against it and kept calm. He pulled on his mittens with his teeth, and threshed his arms back and forth, beating his hands with all his might against his sides. He did this sitting down, and he stood up to do it; and all the while the dog sat in the snow, its wolf brush of a tail curled around warmly over its fore-feet, its sharp wolf ears pricked forward intently as it watched the man. And the man, as he beat and threshed with his arms and hands, felt a great surge of envy as he regarded the creature that was warm and secure in its natural covering.

After a time he was aware of the first faraway signals of sensation in his beaten fingers. The faint tingling grew stronger till it evolved into a stinging ache that was excruciating, but which the man hailed with satisfaction. He stripped the mitten from his right hand and fetched forth the birch bark. The exposed fingers were quickly going numb again. Next he brought out his bunch of sulphur matches. But the tremendous cold had already driven the life out of his fingers. In his effort to separate one match from the others, the whole bunch fell in the snow. He tried to pick it out of the snow, but failed. The dead fingers could neither touch nor clutch.

He was very careful. He drove the thought of his freezing feet, and nose and cheeks, out of his mind, devoting his whole soul to the matches. He watched, using the sense of vision in place of that of touch, and when he saw his finger on each side the bunch, he closed them—that is, he willed to close them, for the wires were down, and the fingers did not obey. He pulled the mitten on the right hand, and beat it fiercely against his knee. Then, with both mittened hands, he scooped the bunch of matches. along with much snow, into his lap. Yet he was no better off.

After some manipulation he managed to get the bunch between the heels of his mittened hands. In this fashion he carried it to his mouth. The ice crackled and snapped when by a violent effort he opened his mouth. He drew the lower jaw in, curled the upper lip out of the way, and scraped the bunch with his upper teeth in order to separate a match. He succeeded in getting one, which he dropped on his lap. He was no better off. He could not pick it up. Then he devised a way. He picked it up in his teeth and scratched it on his leg. Twenty times he scratched before he succeded in lighting it. As it flamed he held it with his teeth to the birch bark. But the burning brimstone went up his nostrils and into his lungs, causing him to cough spasmodically. The match fell into the snow and went out.

The old-timer on Sulphur Creek was right, he thought in the moment of controlled despair that ensued: after fifty below, a man should travel with a partner. He beat his hands, but failed in exciting any sensation. Suddenly he bared both hands, removing the mittens with his teeth. He caught the whole bunch between the heels of his hands. His arm muscles not being frozen enabled him to press the hand heels tightly against the matches. Then he scratched the bunch along his leg. It flared into flame, seventy sulphur matches at once! There was no wind to blow them out. He kept his head to one side to escape the strangling fumes, and held the blazing bunch to the birch bark. As he so held it, he became aware of sensation in his hand. His flesh was burning. He could smell it. Deep down below the surface he could feel it. The

sensation developed into pain that grew acute. And still he endured it, holding the flame of the matches clumsily to the bark that would not light readily because his own burning hands were in the way, absorbing most of the flame.

At last, when he could endure no more, he jerked his hands apart. The blazing matches fell sizzling into the snow, but the birch bark was alight. He began laying dry grasses and the tiniest twigs on the flame. He could not pick and choose, for he had to lift the fuel bewteen the heels of his hands. Small pieces of rotten wood and green moss clung to the twigs, and he bit them off as well as he could with his teeth. He cherished the flame carefully and awkwardly. It meant life, and it must not perish. The withdrawal of blood from the surface of his body now made him begin to shiver, and he grew more awkward.

A large piece of green moss fell squarely on the little fire. He tried to poke it out with his fingers, but his shivering frame made him poke too far, and he disrupted the nucleus of the little fire, the burning grasses and tiny twigs separating and scattering. He tried to poke them together again, but in spite of the tenseness of the effort, his shivering got away with him, and the twigs were hopelessly scattered. Each twig gushed a puff of smoke and went out. The fire provider had failed. As he looked apathetically about him, his eyes chanced on the dog, sitting across the ruins of the fire from him, in the snow, making restless, hunching movements, slightly lifting one forefoot and then the other, shifting its weight back and forth on them with wistful eagerness.

The sight of the dog put a wild idea into his head. He remembered the tale of the man, caught in a blizzard, who killed a steer and crawled inside the carcass, and so was saved. He would kill the dog and bury his hands in the warm body until the numbness went out of them. Then he could build another fire. He spoke to the dog, calling it to him; but in his voice was a strange note of fear that frightened the animal, who had never known the man to speak in such way before. Something was the matter, and its suspicious nature sensed danger—it knew not what danger, but somewhere, somehow, in its brain arose an apprehension of the man. It flattened its ears down at the sound of the man's voice, and its restless, hunching movements and the liftings and shiftings of its forefeet became more pronounced; but it would not come to the man. He got on his hands and knees and crawled toward the dog. This unusual posture again excited suspicion, and the animal sidled mincingly away.

The man sat up in the snow for a moment and struggled for calmness. Then he pulled on his mittens, by means of his teeth, and got upon his feet. He glanced down at first in order to assure himself that he was really standing up, for the absence of sensation in his feet left him unrelated to the earth. His erect position in itself started to drive the webs of suspicion from the dog's mind; and when he spoke peremptorily, with the sound of whip lashes in his voice, the dog rendered its customary allegiance and came to him. As it came within reaching distance, the man lost his control. His arms flashed out to the dog, and he experienced genuine surprise when he discovered that his hands could not clutch, that there was neither bend nor feeling in the fingers. He had forgotten for the moment that they were frozen and that they were freezing more and more. All this happened quickly, and before the animal could get away, he encircled its body with his arms. He sat down in the snow, and in this fashion held the dog, while it snarled and whined and struggled.

But it was all he could do, hold its body encircled in his arms and sit there. He realized that he could not kill the dog. There was no way to do it. With his helpless hands he could neither draw nor hold his sheath knife nor throttle the animal.

He released it, and it plunged wildly away, with tail between its legs, and still snarling. It halted forty feet away and surveyed him curiously, with ears sharply pricked forward.

The man looked down at his hands in order to locate them, and found them hanging on the ends of his arms. It struck him as curious that one should have to use his eyes in order to find out where his hands were. He began threshing his arms back

and forth, beating the mittened hands against his sides. He did this for five minutes, violently, and his heart pumped enough blood up to the surface to put a stop to his shivering. But no sensation was aroused in the hands. He had an impression that they hung like weights on the ends of his arms, but when he tried to run the impression down, he could not find it.

A certain fear of death, dull and oppressive, came to him. This fear quickly became poignant as he realized that it was no longer a mere matter of freezing his fingers and toes, or of losing his hands and feet, but that it was a matter of life and death with the chances against him. This threw him into a panic, and he turned and ran up the creek bed along the old, dim trail. The dog joined in behind and kept up with him. He ran blindly, without intention, in fear such as he had never known in his life. Slowly, as he plowed and floundered through the snow, he began to see things again—the banks of the creek, the old timber jams, the leafless aspens, and the sky. The running made him feel better. He did not shiver. Maybe, if he ran on, his feet would thaw out; and, anyway, if he ran far enough, he would reach camp and the boys. Without doubt he would lose some fingers, and toes and some of his face; but the boys would take care of him, and save the rest of him when he got there. And at the same time there was another thought in his mind that said he would never get to the camp and the boys; that it was too many miles away, that the freezing had too great a start on him, and that he would soon be stiff and dead. This thought he kept in the background and refused to consider. Sometimes it pushed itself forward and demanded to be heard, but he thrust it back and strove to think of other things.

It struck him as curious that he could run at all on feet so frozen that he could not feel them when they struck the earth and took the weight of his body. He seemed to himself to skim along above the surface, and to have no connection with the earth. Somewhere he had once seen a winged Mercury, and he wondered if Mercury felt as he felt when skimming over the earth.

His theory of running until he reached camp and the boys had one flaw in it: he lacked the endurance. Several times he stumbled, and finally he tottered, crumpled up, and fell. When he tried to rise, he failed. He must sit and rest, he decided, and next time he would merely walk and keep on going. As he sat and regained his breath, he noted that he was feeling quite warm and comfortable. He was not shivering and it even seemed that a warm glow had come to his chest and trunk. And yet, when he touched his nose or cheeks, there was no sensation. Running would not thaw them out. Nor would it thaw out his hands and feet. Then the thought came to him that the frozen portions of his body must be extending. He tried to keep this thought down, to forget it, to think of something else; he was aware of the panicky feeling that it caused, and he was afraid of the panic. But the thought asserted itself, and persisted, until it produced a vision of his body totally frozen. This was too much, and he made another wild run along the trail. Once he slowed down to a walk, but the thought of the freezing extending itself made him run again.

And all the time the dog ran with him, at his heels. When he fell down a second time, it curled its tail over its forefeet and sat in front of him, facing him, curiously eager and intent. The warmth and security of the animal angered him, and he cursed it till it flattened down its ears appeasingly. This time the shivering came more quickly upon the man. He was losing in his battle with the frost. It was creeping into his body from all sides. The thought of it drove him on, but he ran no more than a hundred feet, when he staggered and pitched headlong. It was his last panic. When he had recovered his breath and control, he sat up and entertained in his mind the conception of meeting death with dignity. However, the conception did not come to him in such terms. His idea of it was that he had been making a fool of himself, running around like a chicken with its head cut off—such was the simile that occurred to him. Well, he was bound to freeze anyway, and he might as well take it decently. With this new-found peace of mind came the first glimmerings of drowsiness. A

good idea, he thought, to sleep off to death. It was like taking an anesthetic. Freezing was not so bad as people thought. There were lots worse ways to die.

He pictured the boys finding his body next day. Suddenly he found himself with them, coming along the trail and looking for himself. And, still with them, he came around a turn in the trail and found himself lying in the snow. He did not belong with himself any more, for even then he was out of himself, standing with the boys and looking at himself in the snow.

It certainly was cold, was his thought. When he got back to the States he could tell the folks what real cold was. He drifted on from this to a vision of the old-timer on Sulphur Creek. He could see him quite clearly, warm and comfortable, and smoking a pipe.

"You were right, old hoss; you were right," the man mumbled to the old-timer of Sulphur Creek.

Then the man drowsed off into what seemed to him the most comfortable and satisfying sleep he had ever known. The dog sat facing him and waiting. The brief day drew to a close in a long, slow twilight. There were no signs of a fire to be made, and, besides, never in the dog's experience had it known a man to sit like that in the snow and make no fire. As the twilight drew on, its eager yearning for the fire mastered it, and with a great lifting and shifting of forefeet, it whined softly, then flattened its ears down in anticipation of being chidden by the man. But the man remained silent. Later the dog whined loudly. And still later crept close to the man and caught the scent of death.

This made the animal bristle and back away. A little longer it delayed, howling under the stars that leaped and danced and shone brightly in the cold sky.

Then it turned and trotted up the trail in the direction of the camp it knew, where were the other food providers and fire providers.

"CAUSE for ALARM"

"The gradual breakdown of the American home is beginning to be reflected in the national behavior pattern and is a real cause for alarm." This was the comment of J. Edgar Hoover, FBI chief, in announcing that crime increased 7.6 per cent in 1946 to a ten-year high.

More persons aged 21 were arrested than any other age group. A total of 108,787 persons under 21 were arrested in 1946. They represented 16.9 per cent of the total arrested.

Mr. Hoover commented that juvenile delinquents of the war years are graduating from petty thieves into armed robbers and other serious criminals. Red Feather youth services of your Community Chest are fighting against delinquency by providing opportunities for youth to learn and play under wholesome auspices.

Only more-than-average financial support to Community Chest campaigns this fall will help to combat these worse-than-average records.

Remember, everybody benefits when delinquency and crime are held down by the activities of Red Feather services. That's why everybody should give to your Community Chest campaign.

CARCAJOU HATE

By J. G. WILSON

North from Alaska mushed the speed-crazy kid, hot on the trail of his brother's alibi. But it was a soul-twisting battle he waged when he found the strange mystery of the snowlands.

THE COLD was needle-sharp in Levering's nostrils, and he was glad Jan Gerden's trading post was less than an hour ahead. His dog string had run out into the overflow on the ice of White Creek, and he had been forced to stop and wipe the water and little balls of ice from between the animal's toes; otherwise he would have arrived at the post by now. After he reached the post, he would stay the night; then one more day's trailing would bring him to the little cabin on the south branch of French Creek where Daager was holed up . . . Of course, there was always the chance his trail-information was wrong, but Levering didn't like to think of that. He had to locate Daager without any further delay.

He was making good time now. The trail was well-defined here, a little sunken, but not blown-in or snowed over. The dog's feet churned up little bits of snow, and the runners of the light trail sled scudded easily on the packed surface. Levering had discarded his mukluks and snowshoes for moccasin pacs, and alternately rode the runners or trotted behind, one mittened hand on the gee-pole.

The trail crossed a small flat, swung in along some black spruce, and a mile further on dipped down into a tamarack swamp. As the dog string pulled the sled up over the rise on the other side of the swamp, Levering could see the post. He

spoke sharply to his big husky leader, and the sled moved out a little faster. It was a matter of only a few minutes now.

Then a bullet whined viciously, and the whiplash crack of a rifle split the cold. Levering yelled at the dogs and dragged back on the gee-pole. He heard a slug tear into the frozen birches behind him. He went down on his belly, cursing softly.

He cautiously raised himself after a few minutes. He raised snow goggles briefly to peer at the frozen terrain, but not so much as a jay stirred. He brushed the powdery snow from the front of his fur parka and spoke to the husky leader again. The leather traces tightened and the sled lurched ahead.

Levering traveled cautiously now, watching warily, but saw nothing and heard nothing. The post slowly drew nearer. When he was within a couple hundred yards of it he relaxed completely.

He halted the dogs in front of the trading post. It was a two-story building, the lower part built of mud-chinked spruce logs, the upper part sheathed with spruce planking and tarpaper. The heavy log door was thrown open. A big, squarely-built man with a red beard, red hair and cold blue eyes stepped out. He had on a plaid mackinaw, and his breath made white vapor in the freezing air. He acknowledged Levering's greeting curtly. Levering sensed a smouldering hostility and it puzzled him. At a lonely outpost like this a stranger is usually more than welcome. Levering knelt by his wheel dog.

"You staying the night?" the red-haired man asked.

"Why, yes, I want to stay overnight," Levering said, surprised. He had taken that for granted. "It is getting pretty late in the day and I've been traveling since before sunup." He was peering sharply at the trader.

The red-haired man gazed sourly at the dogs resting in the traces and at the mound of gear under the lashed-down tarp. "I don't keep a road house," he grumbled.

Levering frowned and his tone sharpened. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I keep a trading post, not a way-station."

"What are you trying to say, then? That

you don't want me to stay at your post?"

The trader hesitated sullenly. "No, I didn't say that, exactly."

"You came pretty close to it."

"Well, I reckon you can stay if you want to."

For a moment their eyes clashed, and it was the red-haired man who wavered. "Unhitch your dogs and put them in the smallest compound around at the back," the trader said grumpily. "Then you getter let me help you put the sled up on the cache here. There's a couple of Indian malemutes around, and they'll rip your tarp and eat all your grub if you don't."

Levering busied himself with the snaps of the traces.

"Nice dogs," the trader said grudgingly.

"Mackenzie River strain," Levering said.

THE trader made no further comment. Levering took the string around to the rear, opened the gate of the log compound and herded the dogs inside. He removed the lines then, stepped back outside and barred the gate again. The red-haired man helped him lift the trail sled up on the framework of poles, then led the way inside.

Levering had to blink his eyes against the semi-darkness inside. He pulled off his mittens and beat the frost particles from the fur of his parka. He removed the parka and gave it a couple more shakes. He could see better now. The big room was divided in half by a rough counter of spruce planks. Behind the counter shelves supported a standard assortment of trade goods. Levering deduced the trader kept his furs in the loft above. A big sheet iron stove glowed redly to fill the room with warmth. There were a couple of bunks built against the wall on the near side of the counter. Otherwise the front part of the room was bare.

"Put your stuff on one of the bunks," the trader offered.

Levering laid his parka on the bunk and walked to the stove. He spread his fingers to the heat. "By the way, my name is Levering."

The trader nodded. "Glad to know you," he said curtly.

He did not offer to introduce himself. Levering was more puzzled than ever.

"Somebody took a couple of shots at me on the trail back about a mile or so," he said casually.

The trader was leaning back against the counter. A look that might have been surprise, or perhaps a kind of cunning crossed his bearded face, Levering couldn't be sure.

"Shot at you? You sure?"

"I heard the bullets go into the birches behind me. Of course, they might have been strays but they were pretty close together for that."

The red-head eyed his visitor suspiciously. "I don't know what it could mean. You know anybody who would want to bushwhack you on the trail?"

"I'm a stranger up here."

"I can explain—I did it," a voice said.

Levering stared at a girl in a blue fox parka who had brushed aside a caribou robe to step from the attached living quarters. She had the hood of the parka thrown back to show glossy black hair, a flower-like oval of a face and big, limpid, dark eyes. She had a small-caliber lever-action rifle in one hand, and wore white caribou mukluks with beaded designs stiched into them. Her walk was graceful, and she was small, well-formed. She stepped up to the counter and laid the rifle on the planking.

"I was shooting ptarmigan in the willows just over the ridge," she explained, looking steadily at Levering. "A couple of my shots must have gone wild. I am very sorry."

She held up a string of snow-white birds, heads neatly snicked off, feathers smeared slightly with frozen blood. Levering grinned then a little. He formed his convictions quickly, and had decided this girl was telling the truth. He let his eyes study her frankly.

She was young, about 20. Her coloring was rich, denoting perhaps a trace of Indian blood. Levering guessed that she was somehow the cause of the trader's sullen mood.

She repeated that she was sorry—and lingered on. Out of the tail of his eye, Levering could see the man glowering at her. Yet she made no attempt to conceal a growing admiration for this tall blond stranger, her eyes flitting again and again to his square, hard face.

Suddenly the red-head snarled. "Get back in there! You've made enough eyes for today! Go on! Get!"

As though frozen by a sudden glacial wind her face seemed to glaze over.

She turned slowly, looked again at Levering. Then, putting all the cool deviltry at her command into a slow smile, she poised there. The red-head moved to the end of the counter. The girl flitted swiftly back through the doorway. A soft, mocking laugh floated behind her.

The man turned to Levering. "That's my wife, Lita. I don't know what gets into her sometimes. It's her Cree blood. She's the daughter of a Cree breed and a French trapper from over around Lac La Martre . . . Let me give you some advice. If you ever want to see the worse, just look for mixed blood; I don't care if it's dog, man or woman"

He delivered the last part in a thickened voice. His eyes glittered and he seemed about to say more. Then, as before, his eyes dulled, and he relaxed. "Sorry," he mumbled. "Guess I flew off the handle. I've been a bit upset the past day or two. Here."

He offered his hand. Levering gravely took the proffered hand, clasped it briefly.

"My name is Gerden—Jan Gerden," the trader said. "Sorry I've been a little bit short with you, but you know how it is sometimes."

Levering nodded.

"Lita and I," Gerden said slowly. "We get along all right usually. People are bound to fight now and then, I guess, eh?"

Levering agreed. It was none of his business. All he wanted was a night's rest. He would hit the trail early tomorrow and then . . . Daager! But Gerden wanted to talk now.

"Trader?" he asked shrewdly.

Levering shook his head.

"Didn't think so. Too late in the season. Trapper maybe?"

Levering shook his head again. "No. Not a trapper."

"You must be prospecting."

When Levering denied this, a slight frown touched Jan Gerden's forehead. "A strange white man traveling this far in by himself can be after only two things. There's only fur and mineral north of here."

"There are men," Levering said cryptically.

Gerden gazed at him keenly then, but said no more. Later, Levering ate by himself. He thawed out frozen meat by the stove, went outside and fed his dogs. He was ready for sleep then. He elected to use the blankets on the bunk rather than his robe, stoked up the fire and turned in. He was asleep almost immediately.

LEVERING didn't know what it was that awakened him. The soft step in the darkness, the touch of cool fingers. He awakened with a start, and a soft voice whispered:

"Be quiet. I want to talk with you."

Levering raised himself a little out of the blankets and saw that it was Gerden's black-haired wife, Lita. he walked over to the stove on moccasined feet, opened the stove door. The flickering light gave a red illumination to the room then. She had on a simple woolen dress now that showed the youthful lines of her figure. Her hair tumbled to her shoulders. She came back to the bunk.

"I want to show you what he did to me . . . for talking to you," she said in a low voice. Swiftly then her slender fingers undid two buttons, and she bared a satiny shoulder. She turned a little, pulling on the sleeve of her dress. "There . . . see?"

Levering could see the marks on her back; dark welts such as might be made by a rawhide lash.

Lita squatted on her heels by the bunk so that her face was level with Levering's. "He treats me like a Siwash squaw. I hate him!"

Levering waited. He wasn't sure what this woman wanted, and he was uneasy.

"Must I tell you why he treats me so?" Lita whispered. "It is because I am better than he is, and he knows it, I have Indian blood . . . some, but I am better than he is, and I will have none of him. He is a pig. A big, red, filthy pig! He beats me for nothing."

Levering remained silent.

The girl broke into low, passionate tones. "Now since my mother died, he wants me to stay on at the post . . . Oh, yes, he will marry me, but I want none of that. I would rather be the wife of the first drunken Indian trail man that comes this way than be his!"

Levering had softly grunted his surprise.

"What is the matter?" the girl demanded. "Does this surprise you?"

"You are not his wife?"

"No! Did you think so?"

"He told me you were."

The girl's breath hissed as she drew it in sharply. "So!" She was silent for a few moments, then said, "He was married to my mother, but always he has wanted me. A few weeks ago my mother died. I think he was glad. He was never kind to her, and that gave him the chance he has always wanted. I have my own room here, and there was an Indian woman who came to stay with me. But two days ago he sent her away, and I knew I would have to go."

"What is it you want?" Levering asked then.

Her voice became softer. "You are traveling north. Please take me with you as far as the south fork of French Creek. I have friends there. An Indian named John-Tom and his squaw. They will take care of me. I can't stay here anymore. Not alone. Even a Siwash wouldn't do that."

Levering considered swiftly. "He will think you have run off with me. He will follow—"

"Think of it this way. If I stay he will kill me someday. He is crazy jealous because I won't be his woman."

"It is less than a day's trailing to French Creek. You can't make it alone?"

The girl considered that silently. Then she said, "You can't see why I want to go with you? You were right when you said he would follow, and he is swift on the trail. Do you understand?"

"You want someone to protect you from him, if he follows?"

"He is a coward. He would do nothing if there was someone."

Levering was silent.

"Look," the girl said. She slid her satiny shoulder out of the dress again and twisted about a little. "Would you leave me here for more of this?"

Levering didn't answer. They both heard the trader's step at the same time. The girl sprang to her feet and faced Gerden. His shirt was unbuttoned to show a torso corded with muscle and furred with matted reddish hair.

He had on black breeches and moccasins. His hair stuck up wildly, his eyes glared, and his face in the flickering firelight looked like a bearded satan's. His voice was thick with rage.

"I thought I would find you here!" he rumbled hoarsely.

He padded toward the girl. She shrank back against the spruce log wall, but his extended hands clawed at her. He jerked her from the wall, struck her full in the face with the flat of his big hand. He struck her twice more. She didn't cry out again, but took the blows stolidly, only her eyes alive in her face, coldly, contemptuously, defying him. He struck her again.

Levering yelled as Gerden snatched up a piece of birch from the wood pile and brought it down on the girl's shoulders. She raised an arm, but he grabbed it, spun her about and shoved her to her knees. He struck her again, viciously, with the short piece of birch. A cry of pain was wrenched from her lips this time.

Levering yelled again and threw back the blankets. He wheeled to his feet, snatched up his wool breeches and drew them on. He padded toward the pair, and could feel the cold lying along the floor bite at his feet. The girl was on her side, moaning.

Levering yelled, "Stop it!"

"Keep out of this," Gerden warned.

"Drop that stick!" Levering snapped.

Gerden bared his teeth, but threw the stick of birch rattling on the floor near the stove. "Have it your way, then—I don't need that to take care of you," he growled.

"Get hold of yourself, man!" Levering said sharply. "There's no need for that!"

"I saw you there with her with my own eyes!"

"You're letting jealousy eat your brain away," Levering countered. "She wasn't—"

BUT he got no further. Gerden flung himself forward. One long arm went around Levering. With the first tightening of the corded muscles, Levering knew he was grappling with a man of bull-like strength.

He strained backward, trying to get his hand between his body and Gerden's bulging chest. Gerden forced him backward. The rough puncheon floor hurt his feet. The pressure made him gasp suddenly. He squirmed, strained backward. Gerden was grinning in his face.

Suddenly Levering felt Gerden's foot

behind his knee. He tried to twist away, but Gerden sent him to the floor. He hit on his shoulders, rolled like a cat and came up on one knee. But Gerden, his arms spread, was waiting.

Levering got up slowly. He could see Lita standing against the counter, her hands at her side, her palms against the rough spruce lumber; her eyes were big, tear-filled, and her face was drained of all color.

Gerden padded forward. Levering backed away. Gerden's long arm shot out. His fingers were rolled into a fist as hard as frozen rock. Levering went reeling back from the blow; there was the taste of blood in his mouth.

He swung as Gerden closed with him, felt his fist crash against the bearded chin. Gerden blinked his eyes, shook his massive head, and charged.

Again Gerden gave ground as Levering caught him on the side of the head. Levering chopped at him expertly. Gerden pulled up short and again charged.

Levering stepped back, prepared to swing again, but he felt a long splinter from the hewn plank floor lance his heel and it made him falter. Gerden wrapped long arms around Levering's torso. His weight bore Levering to the floor. Levering heard the girl's shrill scream. He tried to fight the grip. He squirmed, twisted, trying to get his knees and hands under him.

Gerden's grip tightened. Panic swept Levering. He knew he couldn't break the grip. Gerden raised him, banged him down on the floor. His head hit the rough planking. Fog clouded his brain. Dimly he saw the red-bearded face above him. Then his head was banged down again. Levering knew the girl was there too, sobbing, tearing at Gerden's shoulder with ineffective hands. Gerden continued to beat his head against the floor. For a few more moments his muscles remained tight and he fought. Then Gerden, the girl, the pain, all flickered out.

LEVERING slowly returned to consciousness. He had been flung back on the bunk, the blankets tossed over him. As he turned his head he saw Gerden and Lita. She was purring over him, stroking the side of his face where Levering's fist had opened a cut!

Levering turned his gaze from them. He felt the back of his head. There was a little blood there, a dull headache, but that was all. He relaxed and let his brain clear slowly. When all dizziness had left and his thoughts were clear again, the girl and Gerden had gone. Levering let his thoughts dwell bitterly on the black-haired Lita until a drowsiness crept over him. He slept fitfully.

He awoke about an hour before the dim northern dawn, dressed swiftly. He lifted the wooden bar on the door, went outside and climbed up to his sled on the cache. He lifted the tarp, found his meat can. Inside, he cut a couple squares of fatty pemmican and laid them near the stove on the tin lid of the can to thaw. He had half a bannock; that and the pemmican would be his breakfast. He would boil tea on the trail later; he didn't want to linger here any longer than he had to.

He fed his dogs half-thawed meat, hitched them in tandem, cursing the stiffness of the traces and his cold-numbed fingers. He left money on the plank counter for his night's stay, his lips twisting a little in a wry grimace as he did so. Dawn was little more than a pale fan on the rim of the cold, frozen void as he mushed away.

The trail north was not well defined. The lead dog, however, knew his business and progress was satisfactory. Half a day's trailing would bring him to the south fork of French Creek. Then he would turn east for a few miles, and in a cabin built into a cut-bank amongst some birches he would find Daager.

The first two miles passed easily, then Levering saw he would have to begin to break trail. The trail was blown in. He had on his mukluks and snowshoes, but this would slow him up. The sun came up later, a red ball on the horizon, giving no warmth.

The trail left the brushy flats and entered scattered patches of timber, and the going was better again. Then it left the timber, and a long series of snowy flats stretched ahead. The sun was a little higher now, and there was some glare off the snow. Levering put on snow goggles. The dogs were traveling easily. Levering again began to think about finding Daager.

He paused in mid-morning to boil tea,

making a fire of dead twigs. The sun was dulling, as though a haze was gathering. When he had finished his tea, he kicked snow over the fire, stepped into his snowshoe harness and tied the thongs. He looked back before urging the dogs to their feet. He saw a black figure on the trail.

Levering's face tightened. It was a man, traveling without a sled and dog string. He pulled his lever-action carbine out of the leather scabbard lashed to the basket of the sled—and waited. It was Jan Gerden.

The trader was traveling without a pack. A rifle was slung over his shoulder. As he shuffled closer, skidding the frozen snow with the tips of his snowshoes, he slid the rifle into the crook of his arm.

Levering waited calmly, his carbine in his mittened hands, the muzzle pointing casually at the ground. But Gerden made no hostile move as he came up. Instead, his face was puzzled, and doubt was in his eyes. His gaze darted from the loaded sled, back to Levering, then to the thick young spruces nearby, as though the tall blond man were hiding something from him.

"Where's Lita?" he growled finally.

"Lita?"

"Yes."

"I don't know where she is. What do you mean?"

"She's gone," Gerden said.

"You thought she was with me?"

Gerden didn't say so, but Levering knew such was the case. "Man, why don't you get some sense into your head?" he demanded angrily. "Can't you read trail sign? If there was a woman with me, couldn't you tell it?"

"It would be easy to have her on the sled," Gerden mumbled.

"You knew I was lightly loaded; you could have told by the bite of the runners."

GERDEN'S blue eyes moved suspiciously up and down on Levering. Plainly confused, he didn't know what his next move was. He muttered something about maybe making a mistake. Looking at the bearded face in the hood of the black wool parka, Levering began to feel a little surge of anger rise. Now that the surly, red-haired man had stated his business, the beating he had given last night had begun to rankle. Levering controlled the feeling, however. He had lost time already, and a challenge now would be to satisfy wounded pride, nothing more.

Levering walked up along his dog string, checking the breastbands and collars for chafing. He returned to the gee-pole of the sled and deliberately turned his back on Gerden. They surged into the breastbands, and the sled jolted ahead. Levering pushed on the gee-pole until it was sliding easily, then looked back. Gerden was standing in the trail staring after him, the rifle angled in the crook of his arm. Levering turned his face forward and didn't look back again.

As he trailed, he speculated on the dark-haired Lita and wondered at the ways of women. That she had run off, left Gerden and gone out alone into the cold, white wilderness seemed certain. Yet last night Levering remembered her crooning softly over Jan Gerden, the man whose unkindness, she had hinted, had hastened her mother's death, the man she hated.

He was still thinking of her when he met her an hour's travel further on. She was waiting for him where the trail was sheltered by a ridge. She had been squatting by a small fire, her snowshoes stuck in the snow behind her. She rose as Levering approached.

Levering halted his dogs. He stared at the girl in the blue fox parka, slender and small somehow despite the bulky furs. "Where did you come from?" he demanded.

"I left the post early and traveled south a little way in the snowshoe trail I had made yesterday," the girl said calmly. "Then I cut north and followed the ridges." She swept her arm in an all-inclusive gesture. "Until I swung into the trail again. It is shorter, but dogs and sleds can't travel that way."

It was as though that explained everything.

"You have left Gerden," Levering said slowly.

The limpid eyes flashed. "Of course! I told you last night why. Did you think I would stay with him?"

"Last night after the fight," Levering said. "When Gerden had a little cut on his face...you were like a mother with a hurt child."

Again the dark eyes flashed. "You men! You are all alike! Do you think I did that

because of him? I did that to save you from further punishment. Do you think he would have stopped when he did otherwise?"

There was no doubting her; her vehemence and earnestness of expression belied any deceit.

"I want to go with you only as far as John-Tom's cabin," she added. "I waited for you because I am traveling very light, and it isn't wise to travel alone that way." With the toe of her caribou mukluk she touched the small pack at her feet in the snow. She had in addition the small-caliber rifle, her snowshoes and that was all. "Also I want to be with you if he trails me; you saw last night what he is like when he is angry."

Levering was silent. The girl considered him gravely. "Also," she said, "there is snow coming. I would not want to be caught in a storm alone."

Levering shrugged. He knew this woman would trail no matter what he said. What difference if she traveled with him for half a day? He told her about Gerden trailing him, and the trader's bewilderment.

"He was sure he would find you with me," he said. He paused, then added a little grimly, "It is just as well he didn't. In his present frame of mind he would probably start shooting and ask questions afterward."

He put the girl's pack on the sled. She stepped into her snowshoes. Levering traveled ahead, packing the blow-in sections of the trail, and the girl trotted at the gee-pole. That way he was making better time. Perhaps it was a stroke of luck, this girl; he would arrive sooner, and the Indian, John-Tom, might be able to tell him something about Daager.

THEY halted at noon to boil tea and eat a little pemmican and bannock. The girl said John-Tom's cabin was another two hours ahead. Levering cast an apprehensive look at the sky. The girl had been right about snow coming; the sun was gone and a light gray overcast was forming.

They were about ready to trail again. Levering had stowed the billy on the sled, and the girl was tightening the thongs of her snowshoe harness. Levering sensed rather than saw danger—and it was the lead dog growling that made him jerk around...too late.

Gerden stepped out from behind some low-hanging balsam branches. His rifle was leveled, and a strange light of triumph flickered in his hard, blue eyes.

"Thought you had me fooled!" Gerden flung out triumphantly. "It came to me what you had done. he had trailed around and would swing in and meet you."

Levering said, "Listen to me—"

"Throw me your rifle!" Gerden commanded.

"Let me explain to you—"

"The rifle!"

Slowly Levering pulled the carbine from the leather scabbard and tossed it at Gerden's feet. Gerden moved over to the sled and picked up the girl's rifle. He flung it a little way into the timber. His hard eyes swept Lita's face.

"Please," she whimpered.

"Get those dogs around," he snapped at Levering. "We'll go back to the post and settle things there."

The girl whimpered. Gerden looked at her, and one corner of his upper lip lifted. "Maybe you won't be so anxious to run off the next time. Maybe I'll fix it so that a man will never want to look at you again!" He shifted his cold eyes to Levering. "As for you—I whipped you once. I'll do it again. This time I'll use hobnails on that face of yours. Then we'll see if she still wants to look at you!"

The skies were a pearly gray now, and already hard little pellets of snow were hissing in the trees.

"Listen to me, Gerden!" Levering said. "You talk and act like a man who has gone bush-crazy. Jealousy has almost made an insane man out of you. This woman doesn't want you, and you ought to have sense enough to let it go at that."

Gerden growled.

"I'll grant she hasn't been easy on you," Levering continued. "She has played on your jealousy—every man that came to the post! It was her way maybe of punishing you for what you've done to her and her mother, torturing you as only a woman can...but even so, you should do the only wise thing a man could do in your position—let her go."

Gerden swore. "Get the dogs—"

"Let me finish," Levering said. "Last

night she came to me and asked me to take her as far as French Creek. I didn't have a chance to give her an answer—you broke in on us then. This morning I left without her. The first I knew she had left the post was when you caught up to me on the trail. Then she met me south of here where the trail swings in close to some ridges. I was surprised to see her. We hadn't arranged any meeting like that."

"Likely story!" Gerden growled.

"Hear me through. Last night you asked me why I was trailing this far in... Well, I am looking for a man called Daager... I am pretty sure I can find him on French Creek, and it is very important that I find him quickly."

Gerden grunted. For a moment or two the cold blue eyes considered Levering. Then the trader said brutally: "Get those dogs turned around."

Levering's lips thinned. "I can go into details, if you're going to be pig-headed about this," he said. "I'll tell you why I want Daager—"

"Get started back, or by God I'll blow a hole in you a mile wide!"

Levering stiffened a little. He saw Lita creeping toward the sled. Again Gerden growled out to turn the dogs. Levering divined the girl's purpose now. With quiet desperation he spoke again:

"Every man is entitled to the benefit of the doubt. Let me find Daager, then I'll settle with you."

Gerden's face didn't change.

"Let me at least finish my story," Levering said.

Gerden's entire face sneered. Behind him, the girl had a mitten off. With slender fingers she worked the trail ax out of the lashings. She rose swiftly. Her feet made no sound in the powdery snow as she moved closer to Gerden. For the third time, the trader yelled at Levering to turn the dogs... just as the girl brought the flat of the ax crashing down against the hood of his parka. His knees hinged, he tottered, then went limply forward into the snow.

IT was snowing harder now. The flakes were larger and a wind had risen. Gerden was on the sled. Levering had worked over him for five minutes, but the man hadn't returned to consciousness. Behind him, her head bowed against the slash of the snow, Lita plodded doggedly.

When they came to a stretch of blown-in trail, Levering stopped the dogs, turned and waited for the girl. "How much further?" he asked.

The girl, her face screwed up against the driving snow, answered: "Maybe two hours in this."

"John-Tom's cabin is right on the trail?"

The girl nodded. Levering looked at Gerden again. The trader was still unconscious. The girl watched him anxiously, her face somber with worry. She hated Gerden but not to the point of having the weight of his death rest on her shoulders. Levering went on ahead of the dog string and began to break trail. Behind him the sled lurched ahead, the slight figure of the girl bending at the gee-pole.

The trail left the protection of the timber. Levering could see only a few yards into the curtain of white and had to depend a lot on his lead dog now. Here the wind had full sweep, and the trail was bare, which made matters easier, but the cold slid in under the fur parkas, and the snow stung their faces.

Levering knew he should stop and make an emergency camp but to stop now meant he might be holed in for two or three days.

Once the girl caught her snowshoe on an ice hummock and fell heavily. Levering went back to her. He could see weariness in her eyes as he pulled her to her feet. But without any urging from him, she settled her foot in the snowshoe harness and was ready to move ahead.

The wind grew stronger, whirling the snow in a winding sheet ahead of them. Levering found a trail marker near a clump of stunted, bent-over willows; at least they were still on the trail. He urged the dogs on, yelling to be heard above the wind.

His arms began to ache from wrestling with the sled. Yet he knew they were making progress, knew they would arrive at the Indian's cabin before too long... And then his left snowshoe broke.

He was wrestling the sled over a series of ice hummocks where the trail dipped down into a willow-choked lowland and crossed a small, frozen watercourse, when his snowshoe caught on a hummock,

twisted, and he was thrown heavily. Pain immediately seized his ankle.

The girl floundered up to him and peered down anxiously. Levering rolled to his knees and tried to stand up. The pain struck again then, like the jab of a lance. The snowshoe he could replace, he had an extra pair on the sled, but his ankle was something else.

"Ankle," he gasped through his gritted teeth. He removed the broken snowshoe and hobbled over to the sled and sat down heavily. He told the girl where to find another snowshoe among the gear. She found it, handed it to him, then she bent over and put her lips close to the side of his face.

"Camp!" she shouted above the hiss of the snow and the wind.

Levering shook his head. He knew to stop now and let his ankle stiffen would mean he wouldn't walk for a week or longer. He put on the snowshoe and struggled to his feet. His face grayed with pain as he put weight on his left foot. He hobbled to the gee-pole and yelled at the dogs. The sled lurched. Levering clung to the gee-pole, gripping it hard. His lips were almost white, and the skin of his face was stretched taut as a drumhead. But somehow he kept going, favoring his left leg, hobbling, pulled on, it seemed, by the sled, the girl shuffling close behind him.

THE pain seemed to be traveling up his leg to his thigh and up into his body, like a kind of insidious current. He could feel sweat forming, chilling him, but there was nothing he could do about that. The wind lashed his face with snow. Every step was torture.

He kept shuffling one foot ahead of the other in a kind of pain-warped rhythm. One step, then another, then somehow one more, over and over again. He wondered how much longer that could last. Another ten steps, a hundred yards...And somehow the ten steps became a hundred yards, and the hundred yards a quarter of a mile, one foot ahead of the other, endlessly, the sled lurching always before him.

And through the pain and the lash of the storm, Levering kept watching for another trail marker. None appeared as the time dragged by. The lead dog was acting differently now, too; whether this was because of the storm's mounting fury or not, Levering did not know. He stopped the dogs with a hoarse yell.

The girl, her head bowed, ran into him with a muffled cry. Levering crouched awkwardly to scrape at the fresh snow with a big mitten. He could find no sign of the trail; there would be old sled marks, something. He moved out to the right, tried again, came back and worked out to the left. He found no sled marks—they were off the trail!

They had to make camp. He would be too late now, perhaps, finding Daager, but there was nothing else to do. He shouted his decision down into the fur-fringed hood of the girl's parka. For a moment she looked up at him, her face grave and somber, then she nodded her understanding.

Levering started the dogs again; he would have to find some shelter, a patch of timber, a fallen tree, something to break the sweep of the wind. The dogs stumbled ahead. Levering would make no attempt to guide them; let the lead dog pick out a course.

Progress was slow, floundering, wallowing; the powdery snow, unbroken now, was breast high to the dogs. Willow clumps appeared on the right, then on the left. The dogs stopped. Levering peered ahead. He hobbled around the sled, moved up alongside the dog string. He raised his mitten to break the stream of snow lashing at his eyes. The snowy curtain lifted momentarily, and through a break in the willows he could see a smooth ribbon winding among the growth. A frozen stream.

Levering turned excitedly. The girl was at his elbow. Levering swept a mittened hand at the watercourse. "French Creek?" he yelled.

The girl nodded. They had been within a few hundred yards of it when Levering had discovered they were off the trail! Levering peered down through the willows again. If this was French Creek, it meant this was the south branch; it was too small to be the junction of the north and south branches. Since the Indian's cabin was at the junction, that meant by turning west and following the frozen stream far enough east, the cabin where Daager was holed up was between them and the Indian's cabin!

Levering hauled on the lead dog's collar, moving the string down through the willows, out over frozen muskeg that crunched over the sled runners like eggshells and out onto the snow-covered ice. They would travel on the frozen stream.

Levering kicked off his snowshoes and tossed them into the basket of the sled. He rode the runners then, and the girl trotted behind. That way he could put his weight on his good ankle. Levering watched the twistings and turnings of the stream keenly. Down here in the bottom the snow didn't sting and blind quite so badly, and he could see both banks. They had traveled less than fifteen minutes when he yelled out. Ahead, sheltered by a cutbank out of the reach of flood waters, was a small cabin!

The dogs swung over toward it in a stiff-legged trot on the ice. Levering got off the runners and urged the team up the bank. He halted them in front of the cabin. He could see smoke being snatched from the stovepipe and mingled with the whirling snow. He stumbled forward and pounded on the log door with the heel of his hand. The girl came up and stood beside him.

"The Indian's cabin?" Levering shouted.

The girl shook her head. That could mean only one thing! The heavy door swung open, and a small, unshaven man with big, dark eyes, a rounded rabbit-like face stood there blinking at them. He wore sourdough trousers, a checkered shirt and moccasin pacs. Levering yelled and swung his arm at the sled and the dogs. The little man stood there uncertainly, the snow whirling in his face.

The girl cried out shrilly. "Help us with him!" She pointed a mittened hand at Gerden. "Help me get the lines off the dogs!"

The man scuttled back inside and reappeared shrugging on a mackinaw. Levering stumbled on inside. Warmth from a dull red sheet-iron stove bathed him, and there was the gummy odor of spruce. He hobbled painfully over to a bunk with a balsam mattress and sat down heavily on the fringed Indian robe flung over it.

Levering glanced around him. This was a typical trapper's cabin. There were freshly skinned-out martin pelts on willow stretchers, the big stove, a rough plank table and benches. The wood-box, the chinked walls and a couple of number 4 jump-traps hanging by the chains from a peg.

The girl Lita came inside and behind her was Gerden. Leverin's eyes narrowed a little. "How long have you been able to walk?" he demanded sharply.

The trader's eyes were defiant. "A couple of minutes, I guess. Maybe longer."

Levering shucked his parka and beat some of the snow out of it. He removed his mukluks and stripped three woolen socks from his left foot. The girl gasped at the swollen, discolored flesh. Gerden looked on with cold, seemingly disinterested eyes. Levering rubbed the swollen area with his fingers, then put the socks back on.

The small man returned and removed his mackinaw. "I put the dogs in my compound," he announced. "The sled will have to stay where it is unless one of you wants to help me lift it up on the poles."

He was ignored. Levering and the girl were watching Gerden.

THE trader had removed his parka and mittens, had beaten the snow out of his clothing. He came slowly toward Levering, thumbs hooked in his belt. There was no mistaking his purpose. He was taking up where he had left off when the trail ax had crashed down on his head. He stopped near the bunk, rocking slightly on his heels. His lips twisted.

"I guess everything comes out right in the end, after all," he said. "All you have to do is wait long enough."

"What do you mean?"

"Lita will be going back to the post with me when the storm lets up."

"I will go nowhere with you!" the girl yelled.

"Back to the post," Gerden insisted.

Slowly Gerden's big hands knotted into fists. He glared down at Levering. "What about it? Does that meet with your approval?"

Gerden's reasoning was plain. He wanted a fight now, while Levering was hurt, worn out from battling the trail and the storm. He would beat the blond man into submission and then when the storm abated he would take the girl and the dogs.

Levering stood up. He knew this was a fight he could not avoid. Nothing he might say would turn the red-haired man aside. "She stays, if that's the way she wants it," he said harshly. Gerden growled and lumbered forward.

"No, no, he's hurt!" Lita wailed.

Levering rolled his hand into a fist and swung. The blow splatted against Gerden's face, high, and sent him staggering back. Gerden twisted and swung a hooking blow. It caught Levering on the chin, sent him reeling back. His weight came down on his bad ankle and he went down.

He twisted as he fell, but saw Gerden standing in the middle of the room, waiting. "Get up and take your beating," he growled. As Levering got up Gerden moved toward him. His fist crunched against Levering's face. He could tast blood now. He set himself, met Gerden's onslaught. It was toe-to-toe slugging, primitive and punishing. He couldn't retreat.

Levering brought over three solid punches that rocked Gerden's head back, but the red-bearded man shook them off and pounded back with sledgehammer fists. Levering stood up under the storm of flying fists and swung twice more before he gave a little ground. The first swing flattened Gerden's lips against his teeth and brought blood. His other punch missed.

Gerden brought over a savage blow that tipped Levering's head and filled his mouth anew with the salty taste of blood. For a moment the room swam. He was sweating, reeling back. Gerden followed. Levering brought up a bolo punch. It snapped the trader's head back, jolted him momentarily, but he caught himself, shook his head like an angry bull and charged in again.

Levering was borne back by Gerden's weight. He was hit, twice, three times about the face. Then the individual blows became a blur of shock and pain. He felt himself swaying drunkenly. He swung his fists, felt them land dimly, but they seemed to have no effect. He went down. He rolled over and knew Gerden was after him with his feet. He rolled again. Gerden kicked at him and missed. Instinctively, Levering grabbed for Gerden's foot as it swung again. He caught it with both hands, twisted, pushed up and back. Gerden fell heavily.

Levering came to his feet. The brief respite had cleared his head a little. Gerden was up and came at him again. Levering swung.

He felt the shock of the punch in his wrist, arm, up into his shoulder and down the long, rope-like muscles of his back. Gerden's eyes glazed and his knees buckled. Gerden's knees caved. He fell.

For a moment or two Levering breathed heavily through his mouth and gazed down at the man on the floor. Then he dragged the trader over to a bunk and flung him into it. As he turned away, Lita took a couple of swift steps and was against him, her face pressed against his chest.

Her slender fingers twined in his wool shirt, and he could feel her shaking. He put his arms around her. For a few moments the soft sobs continued, then she raised her head, shook her hair back and looked up at him. Her eyes were shining with tears, and red stained her cheeks. She drew back slowly, went over to the stove. Shyly, she avoided Levering's eyes.

LEVERING turned to the little man. He had been watching things with wide staring eyes, his little mouth hanging partly open. He closed his mouth as Levering's eyes pinned him.

"What is your name?" Levering asked.

The little man's dark eyes darted fearfully from Levering to the man on the bunk, then to the girl and back to Levering again. "I—uh—can't see that it's any of your business," he said.

Levering took a hobbling step, grabbed a fistful of the little man's checkered shirt and twisted. "It's Daager, isn't it?" he demanded sharply.

Fear brimmed brightly in the little man's eyes. "No!" he squeaked. "No! It's not Daager! It's—"

"It's what?"

The little man's mouth trembled.

"So it is Daager," Levering said with satisfaction. He let go of the little man's shirt. "I have come a long way to see you."

The little man sagged down on a bunk, staring up at the blond man. "See me?" he asked. "Uh—why?"

"There is a murder trial about to get under way over on the American side—in Alaska. The man to go on trial is my brother; your testimony and yours alone

can clear him. I want you to go back to Alaska with me."

Fear blossomed anew in the little man's eyes. "I won't go back to Alaska," he shrilled.

"You have been afraid to testify because of a man named Dilks," Levering went on calmly. "He has threatened to kill you if you go near the trial. He wants to see my brother hang. Fear of Dilks made you skip out before a marshal could serve a subpoena . . . Well, the man, Dilks, is dead."

"It's a lie!"

Levering shook his head.

"It's a trick!" Daager said.

Levering unbuttoned the breast pocket of his woolen shirt, fumbled with long fingers. "Maybe this will convince you. It is a newspaper clipping. Here, you can read it for yourself."

He held it out. Daager took it hesitantly. His eyes scanned the print. "Dilks... dead, it says," he muttered. "Frenchy Bill Dilks...that's him, I reckon." Levering retrieved the clipping and tucked it back in the breast pocket of his shirt. Daager's dark eyes searched his face. "I don't know," he said doubtfully. "I just don't know."

"There is no trick involved," Levering said crisply. "We'll start in the morning; the storm should have blown out by then. You'll have to do most of the trailing, and I'll ride the sled."

Daager's eyes flickered, and Levering knew he had won. Daager would trail! Gerden moaned on the bunk. Levering looked over at him. He would give the red-haired man trail rations and snowshoes in the morning and start him back toward the post.

That left only Lita. Levering frowned. He didn't know what he wanted to do about her now.

Something stirred within him every time he looked at her. She became conscious of his gaze and met it squarely. Slowly she came toward him.

"What of you?" he asked. "What are you going to do?"

The girl paused. "I don't know," she said simply. "Perhaps stay with the Indian John-Tom and his squaw until spring. Then I don't know what I will do."

"Why don't you come to Alaska with me?" Levering said.

Her eyes widened a little. "With you? Why?"

Levering hesitated.

Then she was close in his arms, her warm lips against his. His head swam. He knew then suddenly just why he wanted her to come to Alaska with him. This was the woman he wanted, the one who would become his wife. Then she was looking up at him with shining eyes. He sought the words to tell her; her eyes seemed to shine brighter as he spoke.

The Ballad of the Northern Lights

By Robert Service

One of the Down and Out—that's me. Stare at me well, ay, stare!
Stare and shrink—say! you wouldn't think that I was a millionaire.
Look at my face, it's crimped and gouged—one of them death-mask things;
Don't seem the sort of man, do I, as might be the pal of kings?
Slouching along in smelly rags, a bleary-eyed, no-good bum;
A knight of the hollow needle, pard, spewed from the sodden slum.
Look me all over from head to foot; how much would you think I was worth?
A dollar? a dime? a nickel? Why, I'M THE WEALTHIEST MAN ON EARTH.

No, don't you think that I'm off my base. You'll sing a different tune
If only you'll let me spin my yarn. Come over to this saloon;
Wet my throat—it's dry as chalk, and seeing as how it's true
I'll tell of the howling wilderness and the haggard Arctic heights,
Of a reckless vow that I made, and how I STAKED THE NORTHERN LIGHTS.

Remember the year of the Big Stampede and the trail of Ninety-eight,
When the eyes of the world were turned to the North, and the hearts of men elate;
Hearts of the old dare-devil breed thrilled at the wondrous strike,

From Ballads of a Cheechako By Robert Service
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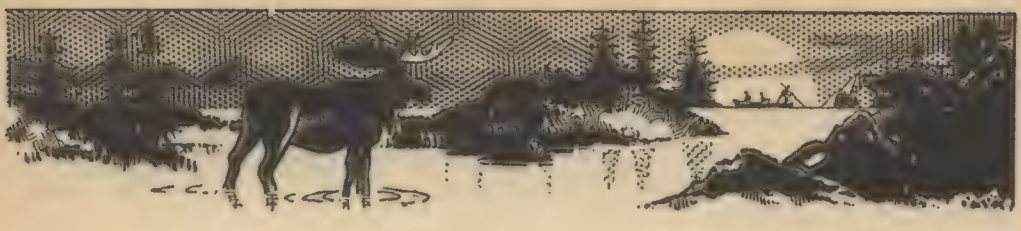
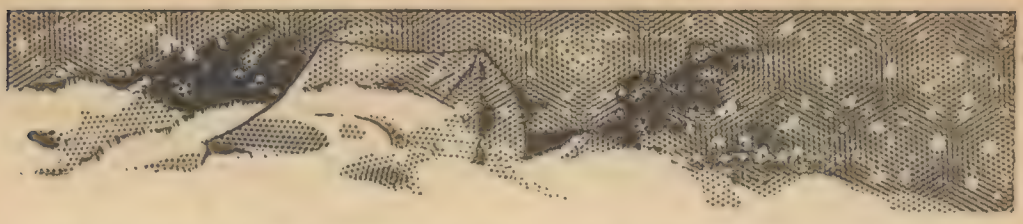


And to every man who could hold a pan came the message, "Up and hike."
Well, I was there with the best of them, and I knew I would not fail.
You wouldn't believe it to see me now; but wait till you've heard my tale.

You've read of the trail of Ninety-eight, but its woe no man may tell;
It was all of a piece and a whole yard wide, and the name of the brand was "Hell."
We heard the call and we staked our all; we were plungers playing blind,
And no man cared how his neighbor fared, and no man looked behind;
For a ruthless greed was born of need, and the weakling went to the wall,
And a curse might avail where a prayer would fail, and the gold lust crazed us all.

Bold were we, and they called us three the "Unholy Trinity";
There was Ole Olson—the Sailor Swede, and the Dago Kid and me.
We were the discards of the pack, the foreloopers of Unrest,
Reckless spirits of fierce revolt in the ferment of the West.
We were bound to win and we revelled in the hardships of the way.
We staked our ground and our hopes were crowned, and we hoisted out the pay.
We were rich in a day beyond our dreams, it was gold from the grass-roots down;
But we weren't used to such sudden wealth, and there was the siren town.
We were crude and careless frontiersmen, with much in us of the beast,
We could bear the famine worthily, but we lost our heads at the feast
The town looked mighty bright to us, with a bunch of dust to spend,
And nothing was half too good them days, and everyone was our friend.
Wining meant more than mining then, and life was a dizzy whirl,
Gambling and dropping chunks of gold down the neck of a dance-hall girl;
Till we went clean mad, it seems to me, and we squandered our last poke,
And we sold our claim, and we found ourselves one bitter morning—broke.

The Dago Kid he dreamed a dream of his mother's aunt who died—
In the dawn-light dim she came to him, and she stood by his bedside,
And she said: "Go forth to the highest North till a lonely trail ye find;
Follow it far and trust your star, and fortune will be kind."
But I jeered at him, and then there came the Sailor Swede to me,
And he said: "I dreamed of my sister's son who croaked at the age of three.



From the herded dead he sneaked and said: 'Seek you an Arctic trail;
'Tis pale and grim by the Polar rim, but seek and ye shall not fail.'"
And lo! that night I too did dream of my mother's sister's son,
And he said to me: "By the Arctic Sea there's a treasure to be won.
Follow and follow a lone moose trail, till you come to a valley grim,
On the slope of the lonely watershed that borders the Polar brim."
Then I woke my pals, and soft we swore by the mystic Silver Flail,
'Twas the hand of Fate, and to-morrow straight we would seek the lone moose trail.

We watched the groaning ice wrench free, crash on with a hollow din;
Men of the wilderness were we, freed from the taint of sin.
The mighty river snatched us up and it bore us swift along;
The days were bright, and the morning light was sweet with jewelled song.
We poled and lined up nameless streams, portaged o'er hill and plain;
We burnt our boat to save the nails, and built our boat again;
We guessed and groped, North, ever North, with many a twist and turn;
We saw ablaze in the deathless days the splendid sunsets burn.
O'er soundless lakes where the grayling makes a rush at the clumsy fly;
By bluffs so steep that the hard-hit sheep falls sheer from out the sky;
By lilied pools where the bull moose cools and wallows in huge content;
By rocky lairs where the pig-eyed bears peered at our tiny tent.
Through the black canyon's angry foam we hurled to dreamy bars,
And round in a ring the dog-nosed peaks bayed to the mocking stars.
Spring and summer and autumn went; the sky had a tallow gleam,
Yet North and ever North we pressed to the land of our Golden Dream.

So we came at last to a tundra vast and dark and grim and lone;
And there was the little lone moose trail, and we knew it for our own.
By muskeg hollow and nigger-head it wandered endlessly;
Sorry of heart and sore of foot, weary men were we.
The short-lived sun had a leaden glare and the darkness came too soon,
And stationed there with a solemn stare was the pinched, anaemic moon.
Silence and silvern solitude till it made you dumbly shrink,
And you thought to hear with an outward ear the things you ought to think.

Oh, it was wild and weird and wan, and ever in camp o' nights
We would watch and watch the silver dance of the mystic Northern Lights.
And soft they danced from the Polar sky and swept in primrose haze;
And swift they pranced with their silver feet, and pierced with a blinding blaze.
They danced a cotillion in the sky; they were rose and silver shod;
It was not good for the eyes of man—'twas a sight for the eyes of God.
It made us mad and strange and sad, and the gold whereof we dreamed
Was all forgot, and our only thought was of the lights that gleamed.

Oh, the tundra sponge it was golden brown, and some was a bright blood-red,
And the reindeer moss gleamed here and there like the tombstones of the dead.
And in and out and around about the little trail ran clear,
And we hated it with a deadly hate and we feared with a deadly fear.
And the skies of night were alive with light, with a throbbing thrilling flame;
Amber and rose and violet, opal and gold it came.
It swept the sky like a giant scythe, it quivered back to a wedge;
Argently bright, it cleft the night with a wavy golden edge.
Pennants of silver waved and streamed, lazy banners unfurled;
Sudden splendors of sabres gleamed, lightning javelins were hurled.
There in our awe we crouched and saw with our wild, uplifted eyes
Charge and retire the hosts of fire in the battlefield of the skies.

But all things come to an end at last, and the muskeg melted away,
And frowning down to bar our path a muddle of mountains lay.
And a gorge sheered up in granite walls, and the moose trail crept betwixt;
'Twas as if the earth had gaped too far and her stony jaws were fixt.
Then the winter fell with a sudden swoop, and the heavy clouds sagged low,
And earth and sky were blotted out in a whirl of driving snow.
We were climbing up a glacier in the neck of a mountain pass,
When the Dago Kid slipped down and fell into a deep crevasse.
When we got him out one leg hung limp, and his brow was wreathed with pain,
And he says: "'Tis badly broken, boys, and I'll never walk again.
It's death for all if ye linger here, and that's no cursed lie;
Go on, go on while the trail is good, and leave me down to die."

He raved and swore, but we tended him with our uncouth, clumsy care.
The camp-fire gleamed and he gazed and dreamed with a fixed and curious stare.
Then all at once he grabbed my gun and he put it to his head,
And he says: "I'll fix it for you, boys"—them are the words he said.

So we sewed him up in a canvas sack and we slung him to a tree;
And the stars like needles stabbed our eyes, and woeful men were we.
And on we went on our woeful way, wrapped in a daze of dream,
And the Northern Lights in the crystal nights came forth with a mystic gleam.
They danced and they danced the devil-dance over the naked snow;
And soft they rolled like a tide upshoaled with a ceaseless ebb and flow.
They rippled green with a wondrous sheen, they fluttered out like a fan;
They spread with a blaze of rose-pink rays never yet seen of man.
They writhed like a brood of angry snakes, hissing and sulphur pale;
Then swift they changed to a dragon vast, lashing a cloven tail.
It seemed to us, as we gazed aloft with an everlasting stare,
The sky was a pit of bale and dread, and a monster revelled there.

We climbed the rise of a hog-back range that was desolate and drear,
When the Sailor Swede had a crazy fit, and he got to talking queer.
He talked of his home in Oregon and the peach trees all in bloom,
And the fern head-high, and the topaz sky, and the forest's scented gloom.
He talked of the sins of his misspent life, and then he seemed to brood,
And I watched him there like a fox a hare, for I knew it was not good.
And sure enough in the dim dawn-light I missed him from the tent,
And a fresh trail broke through the crusted snow, and I knew not where it went.
But I followed it o'er the seamless waste, and I found him at shut of day,
Naked there as a new-born babe—so I left him where he lay.

Day after day was sinister, and I fought fierce-eyed despair,
And I clung to life, and I struggled on, I knew not why nor where.
I packed my grub in short relays, and I cowered down in my tent,
And the world around was purged of sound like a frozen continent.
Day after day was dark as death, but ever and ever at nights,
With a brilliancy that grew and grew, blazed up the Northern Lights.

They rolled around with a soundless sound like softly bruised silk;
They poured into the bowl of the sky with the gentle flow of milk.
In eager, pulsing violet their wheeling chariots came,
Or they poised above the Polar rim like a coronal of flame.
From depths of darkness fathomless their lancing rays were hurled,
Like the all-combining search-lights of the navies of the world.

There on the roof-pole of the world as one bewitched I gazed,
And howled and grovelled like a beast as the awful splendors blazed.
My eyes were seared, yet thralled I peered through the parka hood nigh blind;
But I staggered on to the lights that shone, and never I looked behind.

There is a mountain round and low that lies by the Polar rim,
And I climbed its height in a whirl of light, and I peered o'er its jagged brim;
And there in a crater deep and vast, ungained, unguessed of man,
The mystery of the Arctic world was flashed into my ken.
For there those poor dim eyes of mine beheld the sight of sights—
The hollow ring was the source and spring of the mystic Northern Lights.

Then I staked that place from crown to base, and I hit the homeward trail.
Ah, God! it was good, though my eyes were blurred, and I crawled like a sickly snail.
In the vast white world where the silent sky communes with the silent snow,
In hunger and cold and misery I wandered to and fro.
But the Lord took pity on my pain, and He led me to the sea,
And some ice-bound whalers heard my moan, and they fed and sheltered me.
They fed the feeble scarecrow thing that stumbled out of the wild
With the ravaged face of a mask of death and the wandering wits of a child—
A craven, cowering bag of bones that once had been a man.
They tended me and they brought me back to the world, and here I am.

Some say that the Northern Lights are the glare of the Arctic ice and snow;
And some that it's electricity, and nobody seems to know.
But I'll tell you now—and if I lie, may my lips be stricken dumb—
It's a MINE, a mine of the precious stuff that men call radium.
It's a million dollars a pound, they say, and there's tons and tons in sight.
You can see it gleam in a golden stream in the solitudes of night.
And it's mine, all mine—and say! if you have a hundred plunks to spare,
I'll let you have the chance of your life, I'll sell you a quarter share.
You turn it down? Well, I'll make it ten seeing as you are my friend.
Nothing doing? Say! don't be hard—have you got a dollar to lend?
Just a dollar to help me out, I know you'll treat me white;
I'll do as much for you some day . . . God bless you, sir; goodnight.

Before Doak could speak a word, Tatamagina triggered the carbine.

THE CARIBOU MURDERS

By WILLIAM BROCKIE

(Ex-Constable, Royal Canadian Mounted Police)

Murder will out, even in the vast expanse of the Arctic. A mountie who took part in the apprehension of the two Cogmollock killer-Eskimos relates the savage narrative.

TATAMAGINA and Alikomiak, of the Cogmollock Eskimo Tribe, had long been filled with burning desire for a wife but, because of the Cogmollock Eskimo custom of destroying female babies when famine assailed the tribe there was an acute shortage of marriageable girls. The only unmarried females of their tribe were still children; would not reach suitable age for several years. Tatamagina and Alikomiak had determined they would not wait that long; they would procure a young squaw at once, and share her between them as it was the custom of other men of their tribe to share a woman.

The girl they had decided to procure was one named Nuttingnook. She was young, strong, and from the Eskimo standpoint, exceptionally attractive.

But Nuttingnook had recently become the wife of Pugnana, and Pugnana, despite very generous offers made by Tatamagina and Alikomiak, had refused to allow his bride to share her favors with them. Tatamagina and Alikomiak had hotly discussed the matter from all angles and had at last agreed that as Pugnana was so selfish, he must die.

Tribal laws prevented their killing Pugnana openly and at once, for to have done so would have meant their own execution by the other members of the tribe; a slow and agonizing death by being stripped naked, tied hand and foot with rawhide thongs and placed upon an ice floe to drift far out to sea.

Again, even in this desolate Arctic region of Coronation Gulf there were the Royal Canadian Mounted Police who worked tirelessly and relentlessly to bring murderers to justice. No, they must kill Pugnana in such cunning fashion they would never be suspected. After much discussion they had decided upon what they considered a safe way of ridding themselves of Pugnana, and now the time was at hand.

On this 20th day of July, 1921, Tatamagina and Alikomiak had persuaded Pugnana to join them in a hunt for caribou. They were far from their village and slowly topping a wind-swept ridge. On the far side was a herd of caribou sheltering from the icy wind. For a split second the animals froze, staring with startled eyes at the three men, then in a smother of upflung snow started to run.

All three Eskimos were armed with rifles and all fired at once. Two caribou dropped. With a shout of triumph Pugnana ran forward as the rest of the caribou vanished behind a ridge. Tatamagina and Alikomiak hung back. Tatamagina raised his rifle, sighted carefully and pressed the trigger. Pugnana, running ahead, suddenly staggered then pitched into the snow. For a few moments he writhed and twisted, then became still.

Tatamagina and Alikomiak calmly brought up their dog teams from where they had left them, loaded the sleds with fresh caribou meat, flung Pugnana's corpse atop one of the loads and returned to their village.

STRAIGHT to the snow house of Oolibuk, the shrewd, wrinkled old headman of the village, they went. Upon the sound of their arrival Oolibuk emerged on hands and knees from the depths of his igloo, to hear how Pugnana had got in the way of a bullet in the excitement of the hunt. Oolibuk listened in silence, then appropriating the dead Pugnana's rifle and cartridges, and also some choice cuts from the caribou meat, indicated that the matter was closed and retired to his snow hut.

Satisfied that they had carried out their plan perfectly, Tatamagina and Alikomiak the rest of their kinfolk, then coolly moved distributed most of the fresh meat amongst in Nuttingnook's igloo and appropriated her as their joint wife.

But murder will out, even in the Arctic. Six months later news of the shooting of Pugnana reached the ears of Corporal William Doak, in charge of the Mounted Police post at Tree River. At the time, Corporal Doak had but one assistant, Constable Woolams. Both men had served in the North for several years and knew that the Cogmollock tribe were the most unfriendly and troublesome Eskimos in the Arctic. They were strongly suspected of having killed two white explorers, Radford and Street, in 1912, and two priests, Rouvier and LeRoux, in 1914.

Because of the Cogmollock's bad reputation, Corporal Doak decided to thoroughly investigate the supposedly accidental shooting of Pugnana. Together with Constable Woolams he set out. At the native village, Doak first called to pay his respects to Oolibuk, the headman, questioned him regarding the tragedy, then asked to see the remains of Pugnana. He was led to where the corpse had been cast away, according to Eskimo custom, for Arctic white foxes to devour.

The foxes had not left much, but examining Pugnana's skull, Doak noted that the death-dealing bullet had entered from the back and emerged from the front, proof that it had been fired from fairly close range. Returning to the village, Doak ordered that Tatamagina and Alikomiak be brought before him. Sullen-faced and openly hostile they confronted him. During his many years in the Arctic, Doak had acquired a working knowledge of Eskimo dialect and proceeded to put the two men through a brief but direct cross-examination.

"I have learned that since killing Pugnana you both have been sharing his squaw," were Doak's first words.

Tatamagina and Alikomiak admitted this.

"I have also learned," Doak went on, "that while Pugnana was still alive you tried to bribe him to share his woman with you. He refused. Did you then shoot him on purpose so that you could have Nuttingnook?"

"No," Tatamagina denied vehemently, speaking for them both. "We would not kill another man just for a woman."

Doak considered this, eyeing the two

men searchingly. They returned his stare, their eyes burning with resentment. Constable Woolams stood to one side, watching closely the other natives standing around in sullen silence listening to every word.

"Tell me exactly what occurred," Doak ordered.

Tatamagina at once launched into a graphic account of the caribou hunt and as he listened Doak's first suspicions strengthened, for he knew caribou; how timid and fleet of foot they were.

"So, you came suddenly upon a herd of caribou," he summed up, as Tatamagina ended, "and you all started to shoot? Two of the animals dropped before your bullets and, in his eagerness to taste warm, fresh blood and meat, Pugnana ran ahead of you and Alikomiak thus getting in the way of a bullet?"

"Yes," Tatamagina nodded eagerly.

"And as Pugnana ran ahead toward the two animals you had dropped, where then were the other caribou?" Doak asked.

"By then they were out of sight; had run behind another snow ridge," Tatamagina replied.

"I see," Doak nodded, his face hardening. "Then in that case, Tatamagina, why did you fire the last bullet that killed Pugnana? You have just admitted that by then you could no longer see any more caribou to shoot at."

Tatamagina, no doubt realizing how his own words had betrayed him, could only glare savagely and finger the haft of his sheath knife menacingly. But Doak was not to be intimidated. He arrested Tatamagina and Alikomiak for the killing of Pugnana.

Seven days later he and Constable Woolams, together with their two sullen prisoners, arrived safely at the Tree River post. Doak then at once settled himself to the writing of a lengthy and detailed report of the matter for forwarding to headquarters at Ottawa, thus putting in motion the ponderous machinery of the law which might or might not decree, after careful consideration of Doak's report, whether the two Eskimos were to be tried in a white man's court of justice.

In the meantime, as there was no air travel to the Arctic in those days, Doak knew that many months must elapse before he would receive a reply, for Tree River is more than two thousand miles from the end of the nearest railroad at Waterways, Alberta, and Ottawa is a further two thousand odd miles from Waterways. And for half that distance, from Tree River to Waterways, mails were carried by dog teams in wintertime and river steamers in summertime. Travel by such methods is very slow, averaging not more than forty to sixty miles per day.

WHEN the last boat of the season arrived it brought official word that Constable Woolams was to proceed at once to the post at Herschel Island to relieve another constable there due to go on furlough.

Thus Doak was left alone with the prisoners, his only white companion being a free-trader by name of Otto Binder, who lived in a cabin a few hundred yards away.

Inured to Eskimo threats, never having known a native to turn on a policeman at a post, (in their own villages it is sometimes different) Doak was untroubled by the surly attitudes of Tatamagina and Alikomiak. He could not keep them confined all day for the simple reason that there was no suitable place to confine them. Therefore, in daytime they were given odd jobs to do, and at night they were locked in the storeroom.

Then came the night when the plan of escape Tatamagina and Alikomiak had nurtured for weeks materialized; they managed to force the lock of the storehouse door.

Their sealskin boots making not the slightest sound as they padded across the snow, they entered the building where Doak lay sleeping. It was now November 7th, the season of the long Arctic night, but to the north the Aurora Borealis fanned weird rods of tinted light in the heavens. The eerie glow, flickering through a window, glinted upon Doak's carbine, hanging upon the wall. Tatamagina removed it softly from its resting place—and just then Doak stirred in his sleep and opened his eyes. It was his last movement; in that confined space the carbine's voice was thunderous. The bullet sped true and Doak died.

The harsh reverberations of the shot in the awesome stillness of the Arctic night

awakened Otto Binder. Rifle in hand he ran toward the police post. What he saw as he drew closer caused him to stop short. A carbine barrel levelled at his chest, the murderous eyes of Tatamagina squinting through the sights. Alikomiak, also, as he saw Binder, straightened up from his task of harnessing dogs and looked about for a weapon.

Binder tried to jerk his rifle to his shoulder. Tatamagina was quicker; once again he fired. Coughing a crimson stream, Binder pitched forward, shot through the heart.

Everything, so far, had been on the side of the killers, but now fate brought Constable Barnes and myself into the picture. Now occurred a truly amazing coincidence.

So vast is the Northland and so small the personnel of the Mounted in comparison, an Eskimo village may not be visited by a Mounted Police patrol for a couple of years. Yet, when, soon after the murder of Corporal Doak and Otto Binder, Tatamagina and Alikomiak mushed into their village from the east, it so happened that, in the course of our homeward patrol, Constable Barnes and I swung in from the west.

As we met, the ominous shade of tragedy stilled even the barkings of the dogs. Furclad figures, like shaggy bears, emerged on hands and knees from the depths of the snow houses and a hundred pairs of eyes looked on. The situation was tense.

With one glance I took in the situation. Through my interpreter I inquired as to why Tatamagina and Alikomiak were in possession of police dogs and equipment. Whence had they come?

With the muzzle of Doak's carbine pointed straight at Barnes and I, Tatamagina boasted of his crime; recounted all the details. Then he boldly told his fellows that if they aided him in killing Barnes and me many stores and dogs would be theirs for the taking from our post at Tree River.

As Tatamagina talked, I thought hard and fast. Barnes and I stood in a bad fix. Our carbines were lashed on one side of the sleds, our holstered revolvers were strapped about our waists beneath our heavy fur parkas. I realized that the slightest attempt on the part of either of us to reach a firearm would mean our finish. Neither must we show the slightest weakness or fear. Our one chance was to appeal to the decency and fair-mindedness of the other Eskimos. I turned to my interpreter and through him harangued the whole tribe.

First I asked them if the police had not always been their friends? Could the police remain friends with a tribe that harbored murderers? And Tatamagina and Alikomiak—whose hands dripped red as if from killing a seal—could they ever again be trusted? Might not their hands later again become red from the blood of members of their own tribe if they were allowed their freedom? Had not the Cogmollocks known cases before where one of their number had terrorized a whole village because he was a killer?

Tatamagina and Alikomiak were evil men possessed of torn-ga (killing madness). Better, I argued vehemently, listen to a policeman who was also their friend and had many presents for the Cogmollocks on his sleds, than to Tatamagina and Alikomiak, who boasted that they had shot a policeman as he slept.

THE temperature was well below zero, yet as I talked I could feel the sweat beading my forehead, for all the time Tatamagina kept us covered. But I knew native psychology and although I had apparently mentioned "presents" casually I had done so deliberately. Money means nothing to Eskimos, but "presents" from a white man mean tea, coffee, sugar, jam, tobacco and other things regarded by the natives as being well nigh priceless.

At the mere mention of presents, I noted, the hostile glare in the eyes of Oolibuk, the headman and others of his tribe changed to the glint of greed. Oolibuk made an almost imperceptible sign and suddenly a rawhide noose snaked out and settled about the neck of Tatamagina. As he was jerked off balance he pressed the trigger of his carbine, but the bullet whirred harmlessly well over my head.

Other natives then surged forward and Tatamagina and Alikomiak were flung to the snow, disarmed, bound tightly with rawhide thongs and turned over to Barnes and myself. Then Barnes and I looked at each other, wiped the perspiration from our faces and silently shook hands. I then

distributed among the rest of the tribe all the foodstuffs and tobacco we could spare, then together with our interpreter and our prisoners, Barnes and I set out for the long mush to Tree River.

When we eventually came in sight of the Tree River post our last hope that Tatamagina and Alikomiak had exaggerated vanished. Not a sign of life was to be seen either about the police post or Otto Binder's buildings. As we pulled up before the post we saw Binder's corpse still lying in the snow where he had fallen. Inside the police building, lying upon his bunk was the dead Doak, his sightless eyes still open and staring straight toward the door.

After closely examining the two bodies and placing them in an outhouse, Barnes and I set to work putting a new hasp and padlock on the storehouse door to replace the ones the killers had broken. We then herded Tatamagina and Alikomiak into the building and fastened heavy leg-irons about their ankles. Then, determined that they would remain shackled securely as long as they remained in our charge, I settled to the task of writing a detailed report of the tragedy.

My report shocked headquarters at Ottawa into immediate action, but little could be done until early summer dispelled the ice and saw the opening to navigation of northern waterways. The first boat of the season was the stern-wheeler the Northland Echo. She sailed from Waterways for the two-thousand-odd mile trip to the Arctic on June 14th. Aboard her was the judicial party bent upon carrying white man's justice into Eskimo-land. The party was headed by Judge Dubuc, supported by lawyers both for defense and prosecution, a doctor for the post-mortems, several members of the Mounted and—most significant of all—the needed lumber and materials for constructing a gallows at the tree-less Tree River post, carpenters to do the work, and, last but not least, an official hangman.

The Northland Echo arrived at Tree River on July 1st. The trial opened on July 8th, with the empanelling of a jury composed of white trappers and traders. Through the medium of an interpreter Oolibuk and other members of his tribe told what they knew. Barnes and I gave our evidence; told of how Tatamagina had boasted of his and Alikomiak's crime; described how we had found the two accused in possession of Doak's carbine and other police equipment.

On July 9th, 1922, the case was given to the jury. Without retiring they returned a verdict of wilful murder. Judge Dubuc then donned the small square of black cloth known as the black cap and sentenced Tatamagina and Alikomiak to be hanged by the neck until they were dead. On July 30th the killers were duly hanged. They had murdered three men and came to their own deaths because they had desired the favors of a placid-faced, innocent young squaw.

BEYOND THE MALEMUTE PASS

By R. S. LERCH

Build up a priceless fox farm like Kobuk Bill did and you got every last fur-hungry trapper this side of Nome baiting your play with animal-cunning.

AS HE STRODE UP CORDOVA'S main street, Wolf Sanderson was in an expansive mood. His cannery superintendent had reported a disastrous fire in the warehouse and cannery of his most annoying rival. Wolf himself had just secured from a desperate sourdough a cheap option on a promising copper deposit in the rich Kennicott district to which the Guggenheim-Morgan Syndicate would soon build a railroad. And the chief trader of his fur company, with the liberal use of rot-gut, had lined up the native trappers and traders as far north as the Yukon flats, and was confident he could do the same for the fur-rich Pelly, Stewart, and Klondyke regions of the Yukon Territory.

And then he came to the window display of the Cordova Mercantile Co. showing ten of the most perfectly matched silver fox pelts he had ever seen. The under-fur was coal black; the silky guard hairs were tipped with white; and pure white tips adorned the bushy tails. It seemed almost like an optical illusion. In addition, there were five scarcely less valuable pure blacks

McCabe's three shots sent Sanderson spinning from the girl. Then everything went black.

and three cross-fox pelts. Wolf Sanderson was no longer expansive. He strode into the store.

The proprietor came forward.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Sanderson. I saw you admiring the display. Beautiful, aren't they? I wish they were mine. I could retire. They should bring not less than thirty thousand on the New York or London market."

"Whose are they?" Sanderson rapped.

The proprietor's smile became a trifle strained. He knew the rivalry existing in the fur trade, and the temper of the man before him.

"They've only been loaned to me for show purposes until the next boat leaves for Seattle, Mr. Sanderson."

"Whose are they? Where did they come from?" Sanderson asked, quietly this time, but with something in his voice that held more of warning than had his previous staccato demand.

"Why they belong to the Alaska Fur Trading Co., and I think they came from somewhere near the Seward Peninsula."

Sanderson left without acknowledging the reply. On the way to his hotel rooms he stopped at the Elite Buffet & Pool Room. At the bar, he looked over the players at one of the pool tables. He caught the glance of a small man with bright, weasel eyes and lean nostrils. Sanderson made an almost imperceptible gesture with his head, downed his drink, and walked out. The little man continued with his pool game. Sanderson made a telephone call from the hotel office, then went up to his rooms.

A few minutes later he said, "Come in," and the little man of the pool room entered. Sanderson surveyed him through narrowed eyes. The man exhibited mounting discomfort.

"Was that the new clerk for Alaska Fur Trading I saw you playing pool with, Sneed?"

Ben Sneed nodded.

"Get from him all the information you can about those ten silver grays, five blacks, and three crosses they have."

Sneed grinned. "Easy. I'll have the dope inside a half hour," and he hurried out.

Wolf Sanderson sat drumming his

fingers on the arm of the chair and looking out toward the little harbor. A coastwise steamer was just nosing into the dock. The Kotzeblue Belle would be leaving again within three or four hours, bound for Seward and points north, the season's last boat.

A light tapping on the door shifted his attention.

The door opened before he could speak and Martha Selby, almost young, almost beautiful, and almost a lady, entered the room.

She said, in a faintly husky voice, "I'm glad you called, Will, I was lonesome too."

Sanderson arose, smiling. She went to him, then sighed and closed her eyes as his strong arm drew her in. After a long moment Sanderson stepped back, motioning her to a chair.

The woman sat down, and her eyes cleared, their dark depths becoming appraising as she looked at him. He smiled again, and she spoke.

"You want something, Will. You always do when you kiss me that way." She sighed. "Well, what is it? I'll help you if I can as usual."

Sanderson's smile widened. "Just a little information that only you can get without exciting suspicion. Your husband bought some very fine silver and black fox pelts from someone on the Seward Peninsula. Can you find out who trapped them, and all about him?"

The woman's eyes narrowed slightly. Then she shrugged her shoulders.

"You're a conscienceless devil, Will. I know why you want the information and in getting it I'll be betraying Steve Selby. But you know I'll do it, don't you?"

Sanderson said nothing and Martha Selby's gaze narrowed a little more. The smiling light in them became almost a glitter.

"Yes, I'll do it, Will, because I'm your woman. But be very careful that I'm your *only* woman. If I ever learn that you—"

Sanderson came swiftly to his feet. "Don't say that, Martha. You've no need to worry, I assure you."

Sanderson had her in his arms again. When he released her and opened the door she stumbled out, murmuring, "Within an hour, Will. Steve is leaving on the Kotzebue Belle to visit his posts on the Kenai Peninsula."

SANDERSON took a deep breath as he returned to his chair. A slight frown appeared on his forehead. It occurred to him that Steve Selby might learn about the girl in Selby's office at Seward. Then Ben Sneed came in.

"Them pelts came from Nome," Sneed said. "They been comin' for six years now. At first there was mosly cross-foxes and only one silver gray. Then there was a black and two silver-grays. Each year there's been less of the cross and more of the silvers. Next year they expect fifteen silver-grays. The pelts always come in before the trapping season's well underway down here, but then the pelts get prime earlier farther north. Funny, though, there's always been only one shipment. I couldn't find the name of the trapper, or just where he traps. Only Selby deals with him, and he keeps that information a secret."

Sanderson stirred restlessly in his chair as he listened to the report. There was too much in it that was vague, too much that didn't sound right—like no pelts coming down in the spring after a whole winter of trapping. Suddenly he straightened and leaned forward.

"Get out," he snapped. "Get your passage to Nome and come back here for final instructions." He drew a wallet from his coat pocket, counted out five twenty dollar bills, and handed them to Sneed.

"You may need more. I'll know later. Come back in an hour. If you hear voices slip into the other room by the side door and wait. Don't show yourself."

Less than a half hour later Martha Selby returned. There were no demonstrations of affection this time. Sanderson was getting what he wanted. She leaned forward in her chair, speaking a trifle breathlessly.

"It was easy, Will. Too easy. I'm a little afraid. I'll tell you all I know, then leave immediately. The pelts came from an old trapper and no one knows how he gets them, or where, but Ben has a hunch that these silver grays are not sports out of ordinary litters, but that a separate species has been found, like the Alaska blue, in some secret valley of the Endicotts or the Baird Mountains, and that this trapper's keeping it a secret.

"Now, as to this man; you'd think he'd be rich from the pelts he's already taken,

but he's not. He has some Norton Sound Eskimos working for him, and is paying them well. He bought a small herd of reindeer, and there have been payments to other trappers at long intervals, big payments, as much as five or six housand dollars at a time. And here's a strange item: during the last six years he has brought in logs, lumber, and over a hundred rolls of wire mesh, all of it disappearing inland. A dog-breeder by the name of McCabe has charge of his hauling. The trapper's name is Kobuk Bill Arden."

"Kobuk Bill!"

The exclamation sounded like three rifle shots so sudden and explosive were the syllables. Sanderson was leaning forward in his chair, his gaze boring into the woman. Slowly the flame in his blue eyes died. He leaned back, smiling. The woman arose quickly.

"It's not as much as I'd hoped to get, but maybe it will help," she half apologized. "I'll see you tonight, Will?"

"Thanks Martha. It's enough to help. Yes, you'll see me tonight."

He did not arise as she hurried to the door and the last sentence was uttered perfunctorily, without conscious thought of its meaning. She went out and Sanderson began to examine the information he had.

There were so many facts that didn't make sense, but his probing mind began to pierce the mist little by little. Suddenly he jerked erect in his chair and his big fist crashed down on the arm as he shouted an oath. His thoughts raced and he gave them words in a low husky voice.

"Only one crop a year, in the fall, just before breeding—hires Eskimos, probably to obtain whale, walrus and seal meat and fish—herd of reindeer, also for meat—big payments to trappers, for live silver grays they caught—silver grays increasing, crosses decreasing—lumber and wire mesh. By God, a *fur farm!* Who'd ever 've thought of that? He's breeding and culling the off colors until he gets a pure strain. And it's Kobuk Bill Arden."

WOLF SANDERSON relaxed in his chair while his thoughts involuntarily wandered back ten years, to '98, when he had joined the rush of gold-mad cheechakos to the Yukon.

Even then grubbing in the dirt for any extended period played no part in his plans. There were easier ways of making a fortune. Young, with an engaging personality which was pure veneer, had won the confidence of old Bill Arden, and the two had gone prospecting together.

Sanderson had insisted that his share should be no more than a fifth, since the experience and knowledge were Kobuk Bill's. Within a month they had struck rich gravel and in a week had washed out over six hundred ounces, nearly ten thousand dollars in golden grains. Then the gravel became barren; they had found only a pocket.

With this knowledge, Sanderson clubbed his sleeping partner, carried the body back in the brush, and headed for Dawson. But he had failed to take into account the cushioning effect of the old beaver cap Kobuk Bill wore, awake or asleep, or the sourdough's toughness and knowledge of the country. When Sanderson paddled ashore to camp at a bend in the Yukon, Kobuk Bill Arden stepped out of the bushes with a borrowed rifle centering Sanderson's stomach.

"I ought to gut-shoot you," old Kobuk had stated evenly. "I intended to split fifty-fifty, but now you get only your fifth. Shell out, then start walking. You can have half the provisions."

"And I ought to 've swung harder and made sure you were dead," young Sanderson had flashed, his real nature exposed by the prospect of losing four fifths of the gold he had stolen.

"That's right—you had," Kobuk agreed.

Until today Sanderson had neither seen nor heard of the sourdough since that parting. Reliving this first northern adventure, Wolf smiled with anticipation.

"And how glad I am now that I didn't swing harder," he murmured to himself.

A rap on the door announced the return of Ben Sneed. Sanderson snapped out of his reverie and issued swift orders while he counted out additional money. When he had finished, Sneed grinned.

"I got more news since I was here," he said. "That old trapper you call Kobuk Arden has got a daughter. She's on her way to Nome for a surprise visit to her father. I was down to the ship an' saw her, and she's as neat a package as ever hit th' Territory."

Excitement that held an undercurrent of triumph flared for an instant in the cold blue eyes of Wolf Sanderson. He issued more swift orders and ended with, "And tell Cap Stevens to get the Sea Lion ready to move within twenty-four hours. I want to catch the Kotzebue Belle at Anchorage."

Ben Sneed stared at Sanderson, little eyes dancing. "Geeze!" he murmured. "This sounds like th' biggest thing you ever tackled. I'll get the men on board all right. And—well, it looks like hell in th' north before Christmas."

II

CHIP McCABE, riding the runners behind his team of cross-breeds, topped the crest of a tundra swell and saw Nome just ahead. Out in Bering Sea the last loaded lighter was approaching the beach. A mile beyond it Chip recognized the coastwise steamer, Kotzebue Belle, outward bound.

He swung into the road that broadened into Front Street, and noticed a team of white dogs being driven off the lighter onto the snow-covered beach. As he passed the Northern Lights Hotel the white team entered the street ahead, ten carefully matched Samoyeds, with leaders working together in perfect harmony. There was a passenger on the sled, and the man driving looked as big in his furs as Chip McCabe himself.

Chip's gaze lifted to the passenger. She was small; he could see that even though she was covered to her chin by a beautiful robe of white fox. She was smiling up at the big, handsome man on the runners behind her. Beneath a fur turban, the low-riding sun brought out the glint of burnished copper in her smooth hair.

As if Chip McCabe's concentrated gaze had a magnetic quality, she turned and looked at him. The smile left her face as her wide, brown eyes surveyed the big, fur-clad figure, the bared, blond head above the wolverine ruff of his lowered parka hood, and the gray eyes, level and serious. But there was drawing power, too, in the gaze of the man driving the Samoyeds. Chip's eyes lifted again, and like bared rapiers the restlessly alive blue eyes of the driver crossed the steady, gray ones of Chip McCabe. In that exchange, lasting for only the second during which the sledges were passing, a challenge shuttled between the two men.

It wasn't until Chip was swinging his team toward the rear of the cabin that was his home when he was in Nome that he looked back. The Samoyeds had been halted in front of the hotel and the driver was helping the girl out of the basket sledge.

After putting up and feeding his dogs, Chip changed his clothes and went to the barber shop for bath, shave, and haircut. From there he went to the warehouse of the lighterage company and learned that the supplies and equipment ordered by Kobuk Bill Arden six months before, had arrived.

"Hold them here for a day or two," he told the manager. "I've got some business of my own to take care of before I start moving them."

The manager nodded. "Goin' t' have any new sled dogs in th' Sweepstakes this year, Chip?" he asked.

"Sold a leader and two wheel dogs to Whitewater Charley. I understand he's started training already. Outside of that—I don't know."

"You're makin' a reputation, lad. There was four of your cross-breeds in the winning team last year, and one or two in each of the second and third teams. You got th' right combination; malemute for weight and trail savvy, Norwegian elkhound for intelligence and loyalty, and Alaskan wolf for speed and endurance. Bring any new pups with you?"

Chip shook his head. "Only my private team."

"Well, you got a long trip for the Eskimo dogs with Kobuk's freight. Is the valley where he found that new breed of prize foxes anywhere near your kennels?"

Chip grinned. "That's what a lot of men would like to know?"

The warehouseman's answering grin suddenly straightened out. "Watch it, Chip. I don't like th' looks of a tough bunch that came in on the Belle. Never would have thought of them in connection with old Kobuk, but a little weasel who was with them asked me if I knew where Arden's *farm* was. That doesn't make sense, does it? I told him there's no farms up here except a few vegetable gardens behind some of the

homes. He just said, 'forget it, cull,' and he and his half dozen characters took some twenty five sled dogs and went on to town. I seen some of them dogs before, too, at Anchorage and St. Michaels."

All humor was gone from McCabe's face when the man had finished. The mention of sled dogs brought to his mind the team of white Samoyeds; the big man driving them; the girl in the sledge.

He said, "Men have hunted for Kobuk's secret before. I saw a team of Samoyeds in town, driven by a big man with a square-cut, reddish mustache, and carrying a young woman in the sled. Did they come off the Belle?"

"Yeah, they was the last ones to land," the warehouseman replied. "If any team can beat yours it'd be that team of matched, white Russians. The owner is Wolf Sanderson. Don't know who th' girl is. Sanderson's into quite a few things down around Seward and Cordova, I hear. Wonder if he's brought those dogs up for training for the Sweepstakes. He's got a lot of money and a reputation for getting what he goes after."

CHIP nodded his thanks for the information and headed for the Northern Lights Hotel.

He paused a moment before passing through the wide, double doors into the dining room. Though the dinner hour was past, there were a number of people in the room. Chip noticed three at the rear. They were hard-looking characters and one was a small man with thin lips and nostrils, and ratty eyes. Chip recalled the man who had questioned the lighterage manager. " 'Weasel' fits," Chip thought. And then he saw the pair at a nearer table.

The girl was even prettier than he had pictured her from the brief glimpse in the sledge, and the man more handsome. He was smiling across the table and making some remark. A little, tinkling laugh was her reply. The man looked up, saw McCabe, and the smile left his face.

Chip took a seat at a table near the window and acknowledged the familiar greeting of the waitress. He listened to her chant of the menu and ordered. On her way to the kitchen she stopped to fill the water glasses at Sanderson's table and the man spoke, evidently asking a question.

At the waitress's answer the girl with Sanderson turned and looked toward Chip. Sanderson frowned and said something that drew her attention back to him. At the other side of the room the "weasel' and his companions arose and walked out, passing Sanderson's table without the slightest sign of recognition. Chip wondered if they weren't a trifle *too* unconscious of the pair. Then his food arrived and shortly afterward Sanderson and the girl left.

The meal finished, Chip returned to his cabin. He had scarcely lighted the lamps and poked up the fire in the stove when there was a heavy knocking on the door. At his invitation Sanderson and the girl entered the room.

"Mr. McCabe, I am W. F. Sanderson, and I understand that you are a particular friend of Mr. Arden. I am sure you will be glad to do your friend a favor for which he will be most grateful."

Chip shook hands but his expression indicated skepticism. Sanderson chuckled.

"Sounds like the line of some flash promoter, doesn't it? I don't blame you for being cautious. Perhaps it will simplify matters if I introduce the young lady I was fortunate enough to meet on the boat. Allow me to present you to Miss Georgia Arden, Kobuk Bill Arden's daughter. She is most anxious to go to her father with the least possible delay."

For a moment Chip McCabe's astonishment broke through his carefully controlled mask. The girl smiled and spoke swiftly.

"I—I've read so much about you in father's letters. I finished school a full semester earlier than he thought I would, and I couldn't wait any longer to come back. It's been a long time, you know."

Chip thought he's never heard a sweeter voice.

"I've heard of Georgia Arden, of course. But it was my impression she was a very little girl, scarcely in her teens."

Amusement shone in the girl's eyes.

"She is in her very late teens. Naturally you'd think of me as Dad does. I was only eight years old when he sent me south, ten years ago. He still thinks of me as a little girl. Here—you'll see what I mean when you read his last letter," and she drew several letters from the pocket of her fur jacket. Selecting one, she handed it to Chip.

There was no doubt of its authenticity. Chip had read too much of the jagged writing of the old sourdough not to recognize it instantly. He noted, also, that the addresses on the other envelopes she held were in the same crabbed script. Moreover, now that he thought of it, there was a distinct likeness. Remove the sun, wind, and age-etched wrinkles from Kobuk's leathery face, and the resemblance would be startling. He handed the letter back without reading it.

"I'm sure that you are Georgia Arden. Nobody could duplicate your father's ptarmigan-track writing. Won't you both be seated?"

Sanderson spoke again as Chip sat down on a bench facing the two.

"I'm glad to be of some slight service to Miss Arden, naturally. But I've a selfish motive, too. I have some important business with her father, and it will save both him and me considerable time to go direct to his farm. You saw my dog-team, so you know I'll be no burden, and I assure you I'm used to winter travel. And I further assure you that I'm prepared to make it well worth your while."

McCabe's features gradually became expressionless as Sanderson talked. When he had finished, Chip put a puzzled expression on his face and perplexity in his voice.

"Farm? In this country where perpetual ice is less than a foot beneath the surface?"

Sanderson laughed. There was a little grating sound to it that fractured its amiability.

"Come, come, McCabe! You know what I mean. It is essential that I see Kobuk Bill Arden as soon as possible—for his own good, and at his own fur farm."

Chip straightened a little and said flatly, "I will take Miss Arden to her father if she insists, though it would be far better for her to await my bringing him here."

"Oh, no! Then where would be the surprise I'd counted on so much? And I'll be going back to make a home for him anyway," the girl cried.

Chip looked quickly at her and nodded. "I figured that. And Kobuk Bill needs you. It's why I agreed to take you if you insisted."

He turned back to face Sanderson who had arisen. Chip likewise stood up. This was as he wanted it—out in the open. Yet he spoke quietly.

"Mr. Sanderson, I guide no one else to Kobuk Bill. I'll give him any message you care to send. It's possible he'll come here to meet you."

Sanderson spoke coldly. "I'm sorry, McCabe. And I think you will be, too. Are you coming, my dear?" turning to Georgia Arden.

Chip said, "I've heard you usually get what you go after, Sanderson. And if I can guess your intentions correctly, you plan on going after—*trouble.*"

Then he faced the girl, who was shuttling a perturbed gaze between the two men.

"I'll not be leaving for a day or two, Miss Arden. I'll call on you at the hotel tomorrow and we can make final arrangements then."

Sanderson was waiting. The girl joined him, and he shot a wolfish grin at McCabe as the pair walked out.

Chip sat down and stared at the glowing stove. He knew as well as if Wolf Sanderson had told him that the big man, with his team of Samoyeds, intended to trail him and Georgia Arden to the fox-farm Kobuk Bill had so carefully developed and hidden from the two-legged, gold-hungry, wolves that infested Nome.

At midnight he believed he had the answer. He wrote a letter, got into his trail clothes, and harnessed his team to a light, racing sledge.

III

AS CHIP swung to the runners, calling a low-voiced, "Mush! Haw," to his dogs and turning them left down the shadowed alley behind Front Street, he caught a brief glimpse of a man running toward the rear of the Northern Lights Hotel.

Spy already on the job, he figured.

Once out of town, he uncoiled the long whip and sent its lash curling over the backs of his seven dogs. At the sharp explosion of the cracker his giant lead-dog, Lobo, set a racing pace and they shot southeastward toward Norton Sound and Koodloo's village.

It was ideal sledding. A strong wind had

packed the snow and a spell of severe weather had hardened it making a crust that precluded the need to break trail. Though the dogs had had a long day's run they had had a good meal and eight hours of rest in which to digest it. They made the thirty miles to the Eskimo village in less than two hours and a half.

As he neared it Chip sent out sharp calls, and when he swung and halted his team before the most pretentious cabin, a sharp-eyed little Eskimo woman appeared at the open door. A youth of about sixteen was looking over her shoulder, This small village, with dwellings such as no Eskimo could boast anywhere along the coast of the peninsula, had been made possible by the generosity of Kobuk Bill Arden in appreciation for the natives' loyalty and complete secrecy. Imported lumber, window glass, roofing paper and firewood, and a permanent teacher, had made of the old prospector and trapper something little short of a god. And Chip McCabe was his emissary.

Chip lifted his hand in greeting, then motioned the pair back inside the cabin. The smile on the woman's face disappeared when she noted the serious expression McCabe wore.

"Your husband Koodloo is all right, as is your brother Koutuk. They are with Kobuk Bill," Chip said hastily when he noted the worry on the woman's swarthy face. "But I have need of someone, Keekooya, who can go swiftly to Kobuk Bill with a message, a message that may mean the saving of his fox-farm. Even his life."

McCabe swung to face the young son of Koodloo and Peekooya.

"Itosiak, do you think you can make it within three days?"

The lad nodded eagerly. "I will pick the fastest young dogs in the village, with Aklak for leader. We will get there in less than three days. The dogs are in condition. I have been training them for the freighting we are to do for Kobuk Bill."

"The freighting can wait. Harness your team quickly. If I'm not guessing wrong, there's a man already on my trail. You must be gone before he arrives."

The youth ran out and Chip bent forward, peeling off his parka. Peekooya had turned to the stove and set the coffee pot on. Almost before the coffee had come to a boil Itosiak was back with his team and lightly loaded sledge.

Chip stepped outside to look at them and nodded his satisfaction. The big Aklak, one of Chip's own special breed, was harnessed as a spike leader, and the other dogs, eager for the trail, were all young and lithe. Chip took from his pocket the letter he had written.

"This to Kobuk Bill as soon as you get there. Now hit the trail fast."

The youth thrust the envelope inside his parka pocket, sent his long lash curling over the backs of the dogs to implement his sharp cry, and was away in a cloud of powdered snow. Chip nodded his satisfaction when he saw Itosiak hit the narrow line of shore ice immediately. There would be no fresh tracks leading from the village. After a searching examination of the trail down which he had come, Chip returned to the cabin and the cup of hot coffee awaiting him.

"There are bad men," Chip said to the wife of Koodloo, "who have come to Nome to learn the secret of Kobuk Bill, and to take from him all that he has worked so hard to build. One of them, a weasel, may come here to learn where our old friend raises his valuable foxes, since only myself and those who have helped him know the location. Every one in the village must be warned that no one is to give even the smallest bit of information."

The Eskimo woman sitting across the table from Chip, her stolid face expressionless but her dark eyes alive with understanding, waited until he had finished. Then she nodded her head and stood up.

"I go now. I be back soon. You wait?"

"Good! I'll wait, Peekooya," Chip agreed.

And while he waited, Chip carefully went over what little he knew and suspected, endeavoring to anticipate what other moves Wolf Sanderson might make. That the man was ruthless in driving toward a goal, Chip had already judged. It would be best, he thought, to see Georgia Arden as soon as possible and arrange for a secret, night departure from Nome. He would not be able to hide his tracks, but with enough start he could keep ahead of Sanderson until fresh snow would cover his trail. If no fresh snow came, he would still be able to keep ahead until—.

THE door of the cabin had been suddenly thrown open and three men stepped into the single room. The first to enter, the little man with the thin lips and nostrils, held a nickel-plated revolver whose muzzle centered Chip McCabe's chest.

The other two, sneering-mouthed renegades, carried rifles. Chip silently cursed himself for coming on this trip unarmed. The little man said nothing, but made a gesture to his two companions. They separated and approached Chip from each side. Chip stood up.

"Hold it, McCabe, and you won't get hurt," the little man snapped. "The boys only want to make sure you ain't heeled. Just for safety, yuh better lift your hands —clear to th' ceiling."

Chip slowly raised his hands. One of the pair took a long step forward and jabbed the muzzle of his rifle into Chip's side. The other ran practiced hands over his body, then examined Chip's parka thrown over the footboard of the bunk.

"He's clean," he growled to the leader.

The man with the rifle stepped back. Weasel-face lowered his gun a little and motioned.

"Sit down. This won't take long," he snapped.

The two larger men and Chip took seats. The weasel advanced a couple of paces.

"McCabe, we want to know where that fox-farm of Arden's is. You can tell us now, drawing an accurate map, and save yourself a lot of trouble. Did you ever have your legs and arms broken so that the splintered bones stick out through the flesh? Or have the hide peeled off your back a little at a time?"

Chip looked at the three and laughed, a short, sharp sound that was a taunting curse of defiance. The weasel showed his teeth.

"There's more of us than's in here—if you're thinkin' of putting up a fight."

Before Chip could reply the door crashed back and a big man stalked in. There was a sobbing sound that his victim was trying to stifle. He was dragging Peekooya by the hair, and her mukluk heels were scoring little furrows in the snow outside the door. He heaved and threw her across the room. She struck the wall and slid to the floor.

"Caught her spying outside," he rumbled.

The roar of a wounded grizzly welled up from Chip's throat and his movements, in lightness and speed, were those of one of his own wolf dogs. His sweeping left arm all but decapitated the little man in front of him as he hurled the weasel across the room. Lead from the man's revolver bored a hole in the ceiling just before he crashed into the wall.

Chip McCabe's fist slammed into the face of the man in the doorway. In addition to the sodden thud of the blow there was the sound of the nasal bone shattering under the impact. The man's roar answered that of McCabe and he swung his big fists wildly.

In his moment of blind rage McCabe did not even try to avoid the blows. He took them, smashes that made his head ring, but he had the front of the man's shirt in his two hands. His legs braced, he made a heaving, twisting turn with his powerful body. The man's feet left the floor, his body swinging almost horizontal. McCabe let go and his victim sailed across the room and hit the bunk. He had not even time to slide to the floor before McCabe was on top of him.

Somewhere close by a sharp voice issued a command. It was followed by a gun shot, and lead nicked the tip of McCabe's ear. The next words from behind him got through to his consciousness.

"The next one will be through your head."

The blood-sodden mass beneath McCabe had ceased to struggle, and the eyes in his featureless face were blank. McCabe stood up and looked around. Peekooya had picked herself up and backed into a corner. Her dark eyes were fastened on McCabe.

"All right, Sneed. I'll take over now."

THE voice swung McCabe toward the door. There were four more men in the room now, but it was the man who had issued his order to the weasel with the shiny revolver that held all of Chip's attention. The handsome, sardonically smiling face of Wolf Sanderson began to take shape through the quickly evaporating mist that had seemed to conceal from Chip's sight everything but the face of the man he had been hammering.

"A fair demonstration, McCabe," Sanderson said smoothly. "But there are a few tricks you don't know. If time weren't pressing I'd take a great deal of pleasure in showing them to you. The time will come, though, don't forget that."

"The sooner it comes the better I'll like it," Chip replied.

"That's debatable. However, we're wasting time and words."

Wolf turned to Sneed. "Is he armed?"

Sneed shook his head.

"I judge from what I see that you failed in your attempt to force information from him?"

"Gimme time, Chief. Jake had just brought in th' squaw, an' we were going to work on her. That'll make him sing. If it don't we'll work on him—and we'll let Jake do th' workin'; Jake'll enjoy that—now."

Sanderson's grin widened. "Not now, he wouldn't; not until he regains consciousness. But your methods are so crude, Sneed. I told you they wouldn't work—not on a man like McCabe."

Sneed started to argue, but Sanderson held up a hand, silencing him. He turned to Chip.

"We have two sledges with good, sturdy dogs, loaded to capacity with supplies and equipment for a long trip, as well as my own sledge and team. Your trip here—whatever its purpose doesn't matter now—gave me this excellent opportunity to control the situation. All of us will go directly to that fur-covered gold mine of Kobuk Bill Arden's, McCabe. Oh, yes, you will lead us there. I think, after what I saw in your cabin, there will be no subterfuges or trickery on your part. We will leave at once."

McCabe laughed again, derisively. The smile remained on Wolf Sanderson's lips, but his eyes were glacier-blue. He made a gesture to someone beyond the open door. McCabe's laugh was chopped off.

Another of the renegade crew entered the cabin, and he shoved ahead of him the little, fur-clad figure of Georgia Arden, surgical tape sealing her lips and binding her mittened hands at the wrists.

"Yes, McCabe, I think the daughter of old Kobuk Bill will have enough influence to induce you to carry out my orders. I had a little talk with her after we left your cabin. I learned that, after seeing you, the attachment I thought she was beginning to have for me was somehow fading. But that doesn't matter so much now, though I still enjoy her company, and will continue to do so throughout our trip. Whether or not I allow my feelings for her to overcome my own self-control will depend entirely on you, McCabe. Now I think we understand each other."

McCabe's shocked gaze had settled on the girl. For a moment she stared at Sanderson, and her high-spirited defiance of the big man brought a glow of admiration to Chip.

Then she looked at Chip, and the glow became a fire. The courage was still there, and in addition there was now a plea that rapidly became a demand. He understood and gave a slow negative shake of his head, then turned his gaze to Sanderson.

"You win," he said heavily. "Have you enough food for four days' travel? It will take this large a party that long to get to the little valley on the other side of Malemute Pass beyond the foothills of the Kiwaliks."

Sanderson chuckled. "Thought the girl would bring you around. We've plenty of food."

McCabe turned to Peekooya and caught the sudden, strange glow in her eyes.

"I brought no sleeping robe. I will need one for the trip."

"I get you one," she said tonelessly and shuffled out.

"Follow her," Sanderson snapped at Sneed.

Sneed went out. Sanderson turned to the others, ordering three of them to bring up the sleds that had been left far enough from the village so that the Eskimo dogs would not advertise their approach. By the time the other teams had come into the village Koodloo's wife had lashed a sleeping bag to McCabe's sledge.

Sanderson walked over to her. "If you ever want to see McCabe or the daughter of Kobuk Bill alive again you will tell your men not to hinder us from leaving here, and not to try to follow us," he snapped.

Peekooya said woodenly, "They will not follow."

McCabe examined the lashings on his sled, and his hand, going over the robe, felt

the hard outline of a revolver inside the fur bag.

The loaded sledges and Sanderson's light sledge behind the white Samoyeds came up. Sanderson lifted Georgia Arden into his sled, tied her there, and with mock solicitude, carefully tucked the white fox robe about her.

As Chip McCabe, moving toward the handle-bars of his own sled, passed her, she looked up at him. He caught the glance and looked quickly away. Scorn that mounted to absolute loathing was registered there for the man who was betraying her father.

IV

BY THE THIRD day they were in the foot-hills of the Kiwalkis, with the main range scraping the sky just ahead. Since the first night his sledge had carried a heavy load. Sanderson was taking no chance on McCabe changing his mind and racing away with his fast team.

And since the first night no single word had passed between him and the girl. Whenever she looked at him there was only condemnation in her fine eyes. The tape had been removed from her mouth and hands. Only her ankles remained bound. Sanderson was all solicitude, except for this restriction. Now and then she brightened a little and once became almost effusively sociable with the big man. Her actions often twisted a knife inside of McCabe, but neither by glance nor change of his set expression did he give evidence of it.

From the first, he had camped alone, gathering his own willow twigs to make his separate little fire and cook his own food. Sanderson carried only equipment and food for himself and his captive, and he and Georgia Arden ate together, she retiring later to a small tent brought for her. Ben Sneed and the six renegades likewise camped apart. One of those renegades bore features that were scarcely human; the nose flattened against his left cheek, the cheeks themselves puffed out of all human shape, the lips globs of swollen meat, and the eyes all but hidden behind egg-shaped, tumefied flesh. But those eyes gleamed with something close to insanity whenever their glance touched Chip McCabe.

It was long past sun-set when Chip turned his team into a little draw where naked willow twigs thrust their heads above the crusted snow along the banks of a frozen stream. In the chill light of the sparkling stars the main Kiwalik Range seemed to tower directly over them, but between two of the nearer peaks was what looked like a saddle-back, a little lower than the knees of the mountains to either north or south. Chip waited until Sanderson drove his team alongside, then indicated the spot.

"That's Malemute Pass," he said. "We camp here so we can pull through it at daylight."

"I want to arrive at Arden's valley during the dark hours," Sanderson snapped.

"It'll be dark before we get through the pass," McCabe replied.

The girl on the sledge was staring at him, but he would not look at her. She spoke musingly, apparently to no one in particular.

"I've seen crawling maggots in rotten fish that had more loyalty."

Sanderson chuckled audibly. Chip McCabe made no sound, but two red spots appeared on his cheeks. He turned away to choose a camp site. Sanderson ordered one of his men to scale the highest swell and search their back trail.

Chip had already spread his sleeping robe and gathered willow twigs for his fire when the man returned. The report was as it had always been; no sign of anyone.

McCabe was smoking his pipe when Sanderson walked over. Sanderson spoke in an almost conciliatory tone.

"I intend no violence to old Kobuk unless he forces it. We've known each other before, and though he's a testy old man, I know he's scrupulously honest. But I must have some information before we get there so I'll know how to handle a situation that may be ticklish."

McCabe looked up and waited without speaking.

Sanderson's temper showed a trifle when he asked, "Will you answer some questions?"

"Depends on what they are."

"I want to know, first, the lay-out of the farm."

Chip nodded and explained the location of the fox pens, the breeding pens, the several little towers from which, in con-

cealment, Kobuk could watch the sensitive animals during the mating season, so that they would be properly paired. He described the positions of the small cottage Kobuk lived in, the storehouse for food, the tool shed and work shop, the corral and feeding grounds for the reindeer, and the cottage where his helpers lived.

When he had finished Sanderson asked, "How many helpers has he?"

"Two—Koodloo, the husband of the women where I was visiting, and Koutuk, Koodloo's brother."

"And one of them, I presume, is always on guard."

Chip nodded. Sanderson's eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"At the pass, eh? Hidden from anyone coming up. That's why you want to cross it in daylight?"

Chip shook his head. "Nope. The pass is too far from the farm to keep a look-out there."

"Can the pass be seen from the farm?" Wolf asked sharply.

Chip gave a negative shake of his head.

"Then," Sanderson said quickly, "if we go through the pass during daylight no one on watch at the farm can see us?"

"That's right."

"Strange, McCabe, but I believe you. I'll tell you this, too; I intend to make Kobuk Bill Arden a generous offer for his farm, and if you have any influence you'll urge him to accept it."

"What do you call generous?" Chip asked.

"I'm prepared to go as high as fifty thousand dollars."

"He'll clear almost that much the next time he pelts," Chip replied.

"He'll be doing no more pelting," Sanderson rapped.

Chip replied, using some of Sanderson's own words.

"Strange, Sanderson, but I *don't* believe *you.* Furthermore, I promise you I'll square accounts with you some day. You can believe that."

Sanderson smiled and departed.

CHIP sought his fur sleeping bag after folding his parka for a pillow. Inside the bag's concealing folds he slid out from next to his skin the forty-five Colt Peekooya had given him, and thrust it into the outer parka pocket.

By the first light of dawn Chip was swinging his team toward the pass when he noticed Sanderson say something to Sneed. Sneed motioned to the man with the battered face, and the pair swung one of the other two teams in behind Chip. The other loaded sledge was drawn in behind this. Wolf Sanderson brought up the rear. The new alignment indicated that, though Sanderson might have believed Chip McCabe, he was running no risks on this last day of travel. Chip also noticed that the sledges behind him had their rifle cases fastened to the tops of the loads, and the flaps were open, the stocks of the weapons exposed for easy access. The weight of the forty-five in his own deep, parka pocket felt reassuring.

It was full daylight when they hit the tortuous trail up the pass. Chip helped the dogs by pushing on the handlebars on the steeper slope. It was a long, difficult pull. On narrow benches the animals were rested briefly before taking the next steep pitch.

Continually, when his back was to the others, Chip searched the way ahead. They were on a straight trail now, leading to the level crest a hundreds yards away. On either side the winds of the heights had carved the drifted snow into weird shapes, some of them nearly five feet in height, miniature replicas of the strangely eroded rock formations in the waste places of some of the western states. Nothing moved up there, nor was there the slightest sign of any living thing in this waste of ice and snow and forlorn peaks.

Chip's team topped the last swell and started to cross the high level of the crest. Chip halted the dogs a hundred yards along and the other teams came to the level and stopped, bellying the snow and chewing accumulated ice from between their toes. The last sledge, with Sanderson's white Samoyeds, reached the level.

Chip swung around, slipping the mitten from his right hand and thrusting that hand into his pocket. His last quick glance up the slopes on either side had finally noted movement at the edge of two of the wind-carved snow formations.

And then, from behind one of these, a little man in a white fox parka, his face dark against the ruff, a levelled rifle at his

hip, stepped into the open. Two squat Eskimos, each bearing a rifle, also came into the open. One of them was on the opposite side of the pass.

"Don't move your mitts, any of you polecats. We'll have that potlatch you figured on, Sanderson, right here, and th' gifts 'll be lead pills if y' don't watch your movements," came a shrill voice, quivering with anger, from the little man in the fox-fur parka.

Chip had stepped clear of his sledge and dogs, and the forty-five was in his hand.

Sanderson let out a roar.

"Take 'em. There's only three. Get that double-crossing—" and the rest was lost in the whirl of action and the flash of gun fire.

Sneed knew his job. He swung his revolver toward Chip. Chip fired twice and Sneed bent forward as though making a bow from the waist. But he did not straighten, he bent farther forward, then pitched down, his face burying itself in the snow. A scream shifted Chip's darting gaze.

Beyond the renegades who had leaped for shelter behind their sledges, he saw Georgia Arden swaying on her bound feet, trying to hop away from the sledge out of which she had hurled herself. He saw Sanderson, his face twisted into a mask of fury, slug the girl. Chip fired three shots. Then something rose directly in front of him, a huge man, snorting like a bull through twisted and flattened nostrils. He tried to duck.

Behind him he heard yipping cries, the barks of dogs, and the sharp commands of men coming up the eastern side of the pass behind him. He saw the flash of the explosion directly before his eyes, felt the powder burns on his face, a searing pain in his head, and couldn't be sure he had succeeded in dropping the hammer on his last cartridge before the white world went black.

ARCTIC night had settled and the cold of the heights in early October was relieved only by a bright fire in the pass, fed by wood from a demolished sledge. Chip McCabe's first sensation was of a throbbing pain in his head, and his second was the scent of coffee and boiling meat. He opened his eyes to the bright stars that seemed just out of reach above him, and became conscious of the glow and warmth of a fire nearby. He raised a hand to his aching head, and felt a blood-soaked bandage there.

"He's comin' out of it."

At the sound of the thin, dry voice and of hurried movements, Chip turned his head slowly toward the fire. The withered face of Kobuk Bill Arden, split by a grin, was turned toward him. There were grins, too, on the faces of a dozen Eskimo men looking at him from around the fire. Arden was filling a cup with coffee and talking while he added sugar and a chunk of frozen reindeer milk.

"An inch to th' left and I'd h've been cursin' you for makin' me dig a six foot trench in frozen dirt. Y' didn't get much more'n a cut in the scalp, but th' bucko who give it to yuh took your lead in th' brisket. An' you ain't so tough 's yuh think yuh are. It's took about two hours for you to come out of it."

The confusion in Chip's mind was slowly straightening out. He began to remember a few facts.

"Itosiak got my letter to you?" he asked.

"You bet. Come yesterday, and I sent him back and me and Koodloo and Koutuk got busy. Fifty miles from th' farm to here, an' we made it an hour before daylight. Lucky we did. Figured you wouldn't be along until tomorrow and were goin' to camp below th' pass, but Koutuk come up here for a look and saw you just hittin' th' slope.

"You didn't tell me they was an army comin'. We'd 've been cleaned out if Peekooya hadn't learned where you was comin' and sent every man in th' village to help. They got here just in time. How'd she knew we would need them."

"I was captured in the village. Told her where I was coming—clear away from th' trail to your farm—without th' others realizing it. She's a wise little lady."

"She is that," Kobuk Bill agreed at once. "Now shut up and drink this. Caribou mulligan coming up, too," and he handed the cup of coffee to Chip while one of the Eskimos approached with a bowl of steaming stew.

Chip sat up slowly. He gulped the coffee and reached for the stew. He had all but finished it when he looked around in-

quiringly. His memory had returned fully now. He saw the stack of bodies against the wall of the pass. He counted seven.

Kobuk Bill, understood his question before it was asked.

"Yep, th' big, smooth-talkin' pole-cat got away. Funny thing, too, he had a boy with him. When th' kid tried to run away Wolf knocked him down and threw him on the sledge, whirled those white dogs of his, and took off down the pass as though he had wings. I fired till he went out of sight around a bend, but the sled was swayin' and travelin' fast and he was ridin' th' runners. Besides, my sight ain't what it used to be. Reckon I didn't even nick him. But I'll be headin' for Nome to settle with that wolverine. Thought I'd taught him a lesson once before, but this time I'll make sure. Hey! What th' hell's th' matter with you? Lie down there."

Chip, his cheeks pale beneath their bloody surface, had dropped the bowl of stew and heaved himself to his feet.

"Harness my team."

Arden gripped Chip's arms.

"You crazy fool! It ain't that urgent. Anyway, Sanderson'll try again. I know that hyena better'n you. He won't give up so easy. We'll get another whack at him, and next time we'll plant him. Now settle down and rest."

"Let go, Kobuk. You can follow soon's th' boys 've eaten, but I'm traveling now."

V

THEY DASHED forward and Chip gripped the handle-bars hard until his sight cleared a little, then he rode the brake down the pass, the snow-spray fanning out behind him as he kept the sled from over-running the wheel dogs.

He remembered few details of that trip afterward. He knew he traveled until he nearly fell off the sled. Daylight and darkness didn't mean anything. When the dogs were barely crawling along and he could no longer stand on the runners, let alone trot behind the team, he camped. That is, he unharnessed and fed the dogs and crawled into his sleeping bag. He wasn't hungry. Nor did he know how long he slept. When he awakened both he and the dogs were rested.

He passed a camp site of the fugitives but he never saw them. He tried to figure his chance of overtaking them. Their load was heavier, but there were ten of the Samoyeds and but seven of his own cross-breeds. His dogs were larger, and he believed faster and better for a sustained grind, but Sanderson had a two hour start. He gave up figuring and kept his dogs at their top speed, trotting behind them oftener and for a longer distance each time.

He camped again just enough to allow the dogs to digest their food. The sun was coming up when he sighted Nome. Then something unusual caught his attention.

In the shallow harbor at the mouth of Snake River there were two small cruisers that had not been there when he had left town. And just swinging on to the wharf to which the boats were tied he saw the Samoyeds, Wolf Sanderson driving.

He uncoiled the whip. The team broke into the best racing pace it could attain. His eyes holding to Sanderson, he saw the big man halt the team, go to the sled and lean over, then hurry onto the farthest boat, bearing in his arms a bundle that Chip knew was the robe-concealed form of Georgia Arden. Sanderson disappeared below decks as Chip, swinging wide of the town, headed straight for the harbor.

McCabe passed the first cruiser and was dimly conscious of a man and woman coming on deck and staring at him. He didn't know that he presented a terrible and portentious spectacle, with his lips twisted by fatigue and the rage that was building up within him, with six days' growth of whiskers, and one whole side of his face a mass of black, congealed blood, and his unruly blond hair confined by a blood-soaked bandage.

He halted his dogs behind the Samoyeds. The legend in gilt letters on the stern of the boat read, "Sea Lion, Cordova." He lunged toward the rail, forgetting his rifle, unconscious even that the long lashed whip was trailing from his right hand. He had heard a voice below decks and he charged toward the companionway with its shiny brass rails.

As he moved downward with a more cautious tread, silent in his mukluks, he began to distinguish words. The voice was Sanderson's.

"—don't care, so much, as long as I've got you, my dear. Not only because of

your charming self, but because I am hereby collecting a long overdue debt from your father. I'll release you just the moment I get back from rounding up my crew in town. And I regret having had to gag you, but I wouldn't want you to call out for help with one of my business rivals in the next boat."

"She won't have to." Chip scarcely realized that the croaking sound was his own voice as he stood in the doorway.

WOLF SANDERSON stood with his back to the door, looking down at the trussed form on the couch against the wall. At the first word behind him he whirled, jerked the gun out. The whip lash snaked forward, curled around the weapon, and Chip snapped it back hard. The gun flew through the air. Chip threw the whip after the gun and took another step.

"You were going to show me some fighting tricks, Sanderson. I'll take that lesson now."

The girl on the couch stared in horror.

"That's right, McCabe. Here's one of them," he said almost softly, and his left fist snapped out, sinking into Chip's solar plexus.

Chip plunged at Sanderson. He knew little of the science of boxing.

Sanderson slashed and darted away, his blows well timed, his movements smooth as oil on glass, as he slipped, or blocked, or rode with McCabe's swinging fists. Doggedly, McCabe kept after his elusive enemy, and almost laughingly, Sanderson snapped in his punches. It was soon apparent that he did not want a knock-out—not until he had thoroughly cut and hammered and tortured his unscientific opponent.

The bullet-sore on Chip's head was opened and fresh blood soaked his hair and ran down cheek and neck.

He gave ground and Sanderson moved in, carrying the fight to McCabe. Confidence built up to rashness and Sanderson stepped in swiftly for the kill as Chip's knees seemed to buckle under a blow that had snapped his head back. But there was no sag in the knees when Chip's legs straightened in a drive to meet the advancing Sanderson. Nor was there diminished power in the thundering blow he shot into Sanderson's face.

Sanderson tried to weave aside, but found he had been maneuvered into a spot between the wall and the end of the couch. McCabe's blow grazed his cheek and the knuckles tore the flesh away. Right and left and right followed, and under the sledging a picture rose in Sanderson's mind of the battered and formless face of the man who had mishandled the little Eskimo woman. He clenched with McCabe, and that was his last error.

Sanderson was a big man, but he was not as hardened as the giant he gripped. With his hands on his enemy, Chip let his rage again well into control of his actions. He was only dimly conscious of footsteps on the stairs leading into the room, of the presence of others in the doorway. He was reducing to featureless pulp the face centering the red disc that floated in front of his eyes.

Only a sharp, constant pain in his head, and the inability to reach his enemy, made him desist.

"Man, do you want to kill him? Let up! He's been unconscious for the last two minutes."

The sharp words brought McCabe back to awareness of his surroundings. He discovered that someone had him by the hair and had pulled his head back so that he could no longer reach the man who lay face up on the floor between his knees.

"All right—all right," he mumbled, in answer to the voice that was vaguely familiar.

The grip on his hair relaxed and he struggled to his feet and looked around. The wiry little man before him was grinning.

Chip cried, "Steve Shelby!"

Selby nodded, then made a gesture toward the woman who was cutting the lashings away from Georgia Arden.

"My wife, Martha, Chip." Then, to his wife, "Your champion, my dear—and mine. A man who is all that you thought Sanderson was. He has done what I should have but never could. He has my undying gratitude, and ought to have yours."

Chip didn't understand all this, but he watched the handsome woman straighten and face him. He was fascinated by her dark eyes, by what seemed to lie in their depths; a vision of past errors repented, of

a husband's forgiveness for which she was thankful to the bottom of her heart, of respect and reawakened love for that husband, and of hate and loathing for a man who had taken her only for what she could contribute to his treacherous schemes.

"He has mine, Steve," she answered.

"Chip—how can I—," came a faltering little voice from across the room.

He saw Georgia Arden sitting up, working at the lashings about her ankles. She looked up into his face, eyes wide.

"Chip—sit down. There must be water and bandages here some place," she gasped, struggling to stand on numbed legs.

Martha Selby turned. "You rest, dear. I'll take care of that. We want to wait for Sanderson to regain consciousness anyway. We have news for him," and she motioned Chip to the couch.

He sat down heavily, looking at the fur trader. "The dogs," he said. "Both teams exhausted—still in harness."

"I'll take care of them at once," Selby said.

THE LITTLE CABIN was crowded. Kobuk Bill Arden had arrived, and the grinning Koodloo and Koutuk were there. Kobuk Bill had roundly cursed Chip for not telling him that the "young fellow" Sanderson had knocked unconscious in Malemute Pass was his daughter, and had been informed that it was not Chip's secret to give away. Steve Selby had learned the source of the magnificent pelts he had been buying, and he and Kobuk were drinking to their further profitable business relationship. And Chip, his head bandaged until he looked like a freshly wrapped mummy, was seated with Georgia.

It was then, after nearly an hour of partial consciousness, that Sanderson sat up and looked around, trying to distinguish objects and persons between eyelids that were swollen almost shut. Martha Selby was the first to discover Sanderson's awareness. She walked over and looked down at him.

"Surprised to see me, aren't you Will? That girl who also played sucker for you in Steve's Seward office talked. When Steve returned he and I came to a better understanding than we've had in the eight years we've been married. And at last I fully understand you. You're not so pretty as you were, Will, and you never will be again. That, I think, will save other foolish women. Now Steve has a word for you."

She turned and her husband came and looked down at the fallen Wolf.

"A few things have happened since you left Cordova, Sanderson. The superintendent of your cannery was arrested and the law is looking for you in connection with the burning of the Northland Co.'s warehouse and cannery. You had an option, practically stolen, from an old and desperately needy prospector. It will expire, now, before you can get back, and the Guggenheims will give him five times what you offered. And third, your chief trader was caught in Yukon Territory peddling whiskey to the Siwash, and he, too, talked. The mounted are also looking for you, Wolf.

"One piece of advice. I don't know what's the matter with Kobuk Bill and me, but I guess we've grown soft. We're leaving now, and I'll tell your captain to get the crew back here immediately. I'd suggest you don't stop short of the States. You're through in Alaska, Sanderson."

An hour later, from a comfortable couch on board the Selby cruiser, Chip called to Kobuk Bill Arden. The old sourdough's twinkling eyes shifted from Chip to his daughter, and back again.

"I'm offering you for that furniture and lumber in the warehouse just what it cost you delivered at Nome. That cottage you figured on building and furnishing for Georgia will look a lot better on a dog ranch than a fox farm."

Kobuk's grin belied the growl in his voice.

"Your offer's damned quick rejected, you battered grizzly. Think I want my girl that I ain't seen in over ten years living near a hundred miles away from me? Move your danged ranch. I need a partner anyway."

The girl and the battered McCabe both stared at the little man. Then she whirled to the man beside her.

"Please, Chip?" she whispered. "That would be wonderful."

"I'm sure gettin' a silver fox for a father-in-law," Chip sighed.

IN THE 1880's, BEFORE THE DAYS OF CONSERVATION, WHALERS, SEALERS AND WALRUS HUNTERS WERE KILLING OFF GAME AT SUCH A RAPID RATE THAT THE ALASKAN ESKIMOS, WHO DEPENDED ON GAME FOR FOOD, WERE THREATENED WITH STARVATION... **SHELDON JACKSON**, FAMOUS MISSIONARY, HIT UPON A SPLENDID PLAN FOR SAVING THE ESKIMOS AND MAKING THEM SELF-SUPPORTING... IN 1892 HE PERSUADED THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT TO INTRODUCE DOMESTICATED SIBERIAN **REINDEER** INTO ALASKA... AND WITHIN A FEW YEARS **1200** HEAD OF **REINDEER** HAD BEEN IMPORTED... THE ANIMALS MULTIPLIED RAPIDLY AND WERE DISTRIBUTED AMONG THE NATIVES... THE SPECTRE OF FAMINE DISAPPEARED!

HOWEVER, AS THE ALASKAN ESKIMOS WAXED FAT, THE FOOD SUPPLIES OF THE CANADIAN ESKIMOS DWINDLED TO ALMOST NOTHING! ON CHRISTMAS DAY, 1929, **TEN** BRAVE MEN COURAGEOUSLY SET OUT TO DRIVE **3,000 REINDEER** NORTH AND EAST FROM WESTERN ALASKA IN THE ARCTIC CIRCLE TO CANADA'S COAST ON THE ARCTIC OCEAN... AFTER NEARLY **FOUR AND A HALF YEARS** OF ALMOST SUPERHUMAN EFFORTS AND INCREDIBLE HARDSHIPS, THEY REACHED THEIR DESTINATION!! ONLY **10 PERCENT** OF THE ORIGINAL HERD HAD SURVIVED -- BUT **FIVE** FAWNINGS HAD HELPED TO REPLACE THE DEAD. IT WAS A COLOSSAL UNDERTAKING, OF TOO GREAT A MAGNITUDE TO HAVE BEEN TRIED BEFORE OR LIKELY TO BE ATTEMPTED AGAIN!

GOLD PIRATE

By LINTON DAVIES

Young Hardin was mushing straight into a death-trap. For beyond the next ridge prowled *Lady Wolverine*, nursing a rifle slug for the first stranger to cross her stake-lines.

SLOGGING along in the shelter of the ridge, Bret Hardin stuck to a pace so steady that his supply sled, obedient to the tug of the shoulder strap, ran behind him easily and without a jerk. Powder snow whipping off the ridgetop swirled under his parka hood, fouling his eyelashes, but that was better than taking the whip of the wind up on the ridge.

He glanced again with satisfaction at the familiar stand of tamaracks down the slope and the boulder huddles beyond, near the creek bed. He was close to home. His cabin, his new cabin from which he would trap through the long winter ahead, lay just be-

yond the next rise. In a few minutes he'd shed the burden on his shoulder, stoke up the sheet-iron stove, and cook himself a real meal, his first real meal since he'd left the Hudson's Bay post at Fond du Lac six days back.

Under his boots the snow crust held firm, obviating the need of snowshoes. From snow crust to solid earth lay two feet of hard-packed snow, the first fall of the year. Just a fortnight back, when he'd left the cabin for his last load of supplies, this valley had been dun with autumnal bleakness, the grass wire-brown, the creek moss seared, and only the evergreens showing their metallic green. Now all was white, except for a tamarack trunk here and there, showing between its shelves of snow-laden limbs.

It was an early snowfall and a heavy one. Well, he was ready for the winter. And a prosperous winter it should be, for all the sign that he had found in the late summer said that the valley hadn't been trapped for years. And Joe LaFleche, twenty miles off on a tributary of the Chipman River, had confirmed his own findings.

"She's good place for fur, by gar," Joe had said.

Slowing up as he tackled the rise, Bret Hardin peered expectantly ahead. His cabin—

He stopped short as he sighted the squat log house. The sled, sliding back, jerked at his shoulder, but he made no move to ease the pull of it. He was looking at the stubby stovepipe in quick speculation.

There was no smoke curling from it, no sign of present occupancy. But someone had been there, all right. All about the pipe, the snow was melted away, and soot lay black on the white-mantled roof.

Without taking his eyes from the cabin, Bret reached behind him and pulled the sled alongside. His eyes still on the closed door, he reached down and slipped his rifle from the sled coverings. He knew of no trouble ahead, but this was new country for him, and one never knew.

He cradled the rifle in the crook of his right arm, shifted the sled sling to his left shoulder, and started forward slowly, his eyes searching the clearing in which the cabin lay. There was no movement, no sound.

He reached the door of the cabin, still watching the trees that ringed the clearing. Then, dropping the sling, he reached the door in two strides, flung it open, and swept the interior with a glance.

It was empty. At least, empty of humans. Taking inventory, he scowled as he saw that a considerable portion of his hard-found supplies was gone. His blankets were crumpled on the bunk. And most of the firewood had been used.

Hardin swore. Whoever his visitor had been, he was a stranger to the manners of the North. No true trapper, having availed himself of shelter thus, would have failed to replenish the firewood. Hardin had one answer.

His visitor hadn't been Joe LaFleche. A stranger, then, had been in the valley.

HE laid the rifle on the table, stalked out to the sled and shifted its contents to the cabin. Then, taking an ax from a corner, he made for the trees. He needed firewood. After that, water. The creek was only a few steps away.

But a gnawing unease halted him near the door. Scowling, he wheeled and studied the snow around the cabin. Whoever the visitor might be, he could not have come from Fond du Lac; Bret would have seen his trail, for there had been no snow since he had left the Hudson's Bay post.

Not a single track broke the snow surface to the south of the cabin. But on the north side, and behind the rear wall, the two-foot cover was trampled. And against the rear wall the snow showed the marks of sled runners. Bret gauged the tracks, which led off to the northeast, and judged that three, maybe more, persons had stopped at his cabin.

Northeast. That way lay Joe's camp. The tracks might be going that way. Or beyond, to the Chipman River, of which Bret had heard gossip of new gold diggings. Or they might swing east, toward Black Lake.

He turned back toward the creek, depressed. In the late summer, when he had found the valley, he had dreamed of a trapping empire all his own. And all through the fall, after his meeting with Joe LaFleche in the valley to the north, his dream had taken substance. Now his valley was invaded, and though he told himself that the intrusion was probably a brief

one, the satisfaction attendant upon his homecoming was dissipated.

His ax was raised to claw a log out of the snow when he saw the girl. She was crouched under a tamarack limb, feet widespread, and the shotgun in her hands was leveled steadily at his chest.

Warily, for all his astonishment, he began to lower his ax. The girl tensed.

"Don't pull a gun!" she warned.

Bret nodded, easing the ax to the ground and letting it fall flat. "Mind if I smoke?" he asked, pulling off a mitten.

"No tricks!" The girl watched him narrowly.

Bret fumbled a pipe from a hip pocket. "Who are you?" he asked easily.

"As if you didn't know!" she cried scornfully. Her eyes followed his movements with the pipe. "Perhaps you'll tell me who *you* are!"

"Sure," he replied, as calmly as if a strange girl appeared every day under a tree in this lonely valley. "My name is Hardin. Bret Hardin. I'm a trapper. That's my cabin there."

The tense set of the girl's face eased. The gun muzzle wavered.

But only for a moment. The gun came up. The girl's dark eyes flashed. "That makes you a liar," she said flatly. "There's only one trapper in this district, and his name's LaFleche."

She came closer, eyeing him with scorn.

Bret grinned wryly. "If you know Joe," he began, "he—"

As he spoke, he had hiked up his parka to get at the matches in his mackinaw pocket. The movement exposed the gay-colored heavy Hudson's Bay shirt.

The girl's eyes dilated. "Red and black!" she cried. *"The Devil!"* And with a desperate effort she swung the shotgun by the muzzle.

Hardin saw the blow coming. But so swift was her attack that he had only time to lift his free hand in feeble defense before the gunstock crashed against his temple. There followed a flashing display of white and crimson aurora borealis, and then blackness.

HE opened his eyes to a thick mist. It was the steam engendered by his breath upon the snow. He stirred groggily, tried to rise, and fell as his numb bare hand gave way under him. Thrusting it under his parka, he scrambled to his feet and looked around.

The girl was gone. Her tracks were clear—leading off to the northeast, and paralleling the thick and jumbled trail of the three who had been in the cabin. Hardin shook his head dizzily. Was she one of their party? And if so, why had she lingered after their departure?

It took him a long moment to decide he had no single piece of the puzzle. Shrugging, he swayed over to his ax, picked it up, and went to work on the wood heap. All the while he carried in firewood and bore water from the frozen-over creek, he forbore to think of the girl. By the time feeling began to return to his frosted hand, and he was cooking flapjacks and bacon, she was as remote as a dream figure.

But after he had eaten he went back to the puzzle. There had been a girl. He touched the tender side of his head ruefully. There had been a girl, all right.

Who was she? He remembered her scornful *"As if you didn't know!"* It was plain that she expected him to know who she was. And yet, Hardin was ready to swear that he'd never seen her before.

Where had she come from? Possibly from Black Lake, or the Chipman River. That might explain how she came to know about Joe LaFleche, and not about Bret Hardin. Bret had never been to the Black or the Chipman, whereas Joe knew them as well as he knew the Fond du Lac post.

Then there was that strange look on her face when she caught sight of his mackinaw. Red and black, she had said. Hardin blinked. If she thought she was identifying him by the shirt, she must be from the Outside. Someone new to the north country. Because every man, woman and Indian hereabout knew that Hudson's Bay posts sold only half a dozen patterns this year. Blue and red, gray and blue, red and black—

His was red and black. But the girl had mistaken him for another man, a man who also wore a red-and-black checked mackinaw. What had she cried?—*"The Devil!"*

Who was *"The Devil?"*

That was the answer, Hardin decided. . . . Unless, of course, the girl was deranged. Out of her mind in the cold pitiless snow and the haunting desolation. But

he rejected that notion. There had been fear, yes, but no insanity, in those flashing dark eyes.

The coffee in his cup was cold. He emptied it into the slop bucket and poured another cup from the pot on the cherry-red stove. Sipping it, he harked back to the first half of the puzzle—the three visitors.

Prospectors? Why, if so, had they traveled so far from the Chipman, the recognized center of prospectors' hopes, only to retrace their steps? Might they have carried a message from Joe LaFleche?

Perhaps Joe was sick. Or in trouble.

Hardin stirred. In the morning he'd travel. To see Joe—and any parts of the puzzle that might be in sight.

II

PALE DAWN was brightening the cabin's two square windows when Bret opened his eyes. He shrugged off the blankets, shivered in the clammy cold, and jumped into breeches, boots and mackinaw.

His head was still stiff and tender. But the dizzy weakness of the night before was gone. He hurried through breakfast and made up a small shoulder pack. On the chance that LaFleche might be ill he added a small medicine kit to his supplies. Over his mackinaw he slung his revolver belt, snugging the holster under his left armpit. His rifle he hefted thoughtfully, then stood in the corner. It might come in handy; but nine pounds makes a difference, and he wanted to travel fast.

He hit the trail with a stiff breeze blowing up the valley, swirling powdery snow into the tracks made by his mysterious visitors, the three unknowns and the girl. Yet the smudged footprints and sled tracks, following the old Indian trail, were not hard to follow. Here and there the girl's prints showed alongside the heavier marks. Did that mean that her destination was the same as that of the other three?

Bret gave it up. His best bet, he decided, was to strike for Joe's camp first. But as he swung along the path he kept a wary eye forward and to left and right. He'd been slugged once, in his own bailiwick—and by a girl. He'd be ready for the next attempt.

His vigilance had yielded nothing when he swung around the face of a high boulder and sighted the LaFleche camp. Two dugouts, built up with logs, served Joe and his dogs. From the larger one a thin plume of smoke arose. Joe was at home.

Slowing up to approach the shack, Bret surveyed the flat for signs of trouble. He found none. Apparently the dogs were snoozing in their squat home. Joe's sleds were stacked neatly against his cabin wall. There was no strange equipment in sight.

He gave four sharp knocks on the cabin door, a signal that Joe knew. In a moment the door swung wide.

"Bret!" Joe's dark face broke into a grin. "Back from Fond du Lac, eh? Come een!" He stood aside.

Nothing wrong with Joe, Bret thought as he moved into the cabin. Everything normal here—

In the gloom of the room there was sudden movement, and someone cried out. It was the girl.

Joe, startled, instinctively closed the door, then turned toward the girl. She had sprung from the crude chair where she had been sitting and now her hand rested on the shotgun that stood against the wall. She did not speak, but her lips were parted, her eyes dilated in fear as she stared at Hardin.

"Ho!" muttered Joe in perplexity. "You know heem, Bret Hardin? *Oui?*"

Slowly the girl turned to LaFleche, the stark fear slowly fading. "You—you know him, Joe?"

"Know heem? Of a certainment!" Joe spread his hands. "Long tam. Bret, he is old-timer. Good trapper. Lak me!" He clapped Bret on the shoulder.

She continued to finger the shotgun. "He is not—*The Devil?*"

Joe's eyebrows shot up. "So! You theenk he is maybe *The Devil?*" He shot a quizzical glance at Bret, and shook his head. "Maybe—so most any wan in Athabasca country could be *The Devil,* but not Bret. No."

She sighed in relief, indifferent to Bret's keen stare. Letting the shotgun fall, she returned to the chair and huddled in it, head down. Bret skinned out of his parka.

Joe scratched his bearded jaw. "Thees man you hit—he was Bret?"

She nodded miserably.

"Ho! That is good wan!" Joe turned

to Bret with a wry grin. "Not so good for you, Bret, no?" He glanced at Bret's head, saw it unbandaged, and grinned more widely. "Bret, he's tough feller."

The girl looked up, meeting Bret's eyes. "I'm sorry," she said.

"That's all right," he muttered awkwardly. He sat down, pulling off his parka as Joe bustled to the stove where a coffee pot simmered. "What's all this about a devil?"

Both turned, apparently resentful. "You theenk she's joke, eh?" growled Joe.

Bret waited.

Joe shifted the coffee pot carefully. Finally, "She's beeg trouble, Bret." He glanced at the girl.

SHE swung to face Bret, her hands clasped tightly. "I'm Janet Morrison," she said. "My father is managing director of a syndicate prospecting for gold and copper on the Chipman. He's back in Winnipeg, but the survey party, six of them, are—were—" Her voice broke.

Joe continued the story. "Gone. Mamselle Morrison, she's camp weeth survey party. One day she's go hunt for rabbits and ducks. W'en she come back, survey party is having beeg fight. One man—"

"They shot old Alec," the girl cried. "I saw him fall. I—I was terrified. I tried to move closer without showing myself. I had to crawl through a wash. When I could see the camp again, they were gone."

"All of them?" Hardin tried to fill in the picture. "The survey crew and the others, too?"

She nodded. "All but Alec. He was badly wounded. He could barely speak when I found him. He said, *'The Devil—in the red-black shirt. Tell your fother—the Devil.'* That was all. He died then."

Her eyes filled with tears. Joe cleared his throat harshly. "She's bad trouble, eh Bret?"

Hardin nodded. After a moment he asked gently, "You saw the man who attacked the survey party. How many were there?"

"Six, altogether," the girl answered.

"Was there one wearing a red-black shirt?"

"Yes. I saw him clearly. He seemed to be giving the orders."

"See his face?"

She shook her head. "No. He was tall. Black-haired. Big." Involuntarily she glanced appraisingly at Hardin.

"About my size?"

"Just about. . . . You're dark-haired, and tall, like the man in the fight. And when I saw that shirt—"

Bret grinned crookedly. "Just about every sixth man up here wears one just like it."

"I suppose so." She colored. "I should have known better."

Joe served coffee in tin cups. Bret sipped the hot brew absently. "It must have been quick work," he said slowly.

The girl was puzzled. Joe nodded. "Thees fight, she's plan very good. For long tam. These thieves, they come fast, shoot fast, go fast. *Oui,* she's play very cunning, just lak fox."

Hardin nodded. "What were they after?" He turned to the girl. "Had they any dust?"

Her eyes widened. "Gold? N-no. I don't think so."

Joe rubbed one hard palm against another. "W'at you theenk, Bret?"

Hardin stared at his feet. "First, Miss Morrison should go to Fond du Lac and send word to her father in Winnipeg."

"That's what I intended," the girl said. "After the—the shooting I came to find Joe. But he wasn't here—"

"On trapline," Joe muttered.

"So I went on. I was near your cabin, Mr. Hardin, when I heard them yelling on my trail. They must have found my tracks. When I heard them, I ran off the trail and hid. They passed me, three of them—the leader wasn't with them. I didn't know what to do. I had no food, and no shells for my gun. So I stayed all night in a cave, and then went down the trail until I saw your cabin.

"I saw their dogs outside, so I knew they were there. I was watching the cabin when they apparently decided to quit looking for me. They turned back. I went to the cabin and ate. I had just started toward Fond du Lac when I saw you coming up the trail. I thought you might be the leader."

Bret nodded. "So that's how it was." He turned to Joe. "I guess she can make Fond du Lac by herself."

Joe nodded.

"You and I will go up there and look around."

Joe agreed eagerly.

The girl stirred. "I should go with you, to show you—"

"No," said Bret sharply. "It's important that you get word to your father. And don't forget to pass on to him Alec's last words about The Devil. It may mean something to the police."

"Yes. I understand."

Bret eyed her thoughtfully. "You're sure you didn't hear any talk about a gold strike?"

She shook her head. "But they wouldn't have told me. That sort of thing is kept secret, isn't it? However—" she knitted her brows "—the chief of the party—Talbert—made a funny remark when he gave me a map of the river." She began to rummage in a capacious pocket of her trousers.

"Talbert's the chief. What's he like?"

"Oh, spendid. Tall, quiet, gray-haired, nice."

"The others?"

"Evans is the mineralogist, Johnson and Willis do survey work and plan shafts and things. Jones is the guide." She produced a folded paper.

Bret and Joe bent over it. They saw a finely drawn chart of the Chipman River, with two X's marked near the stream. Against the northern X was a date, "Sept. 6." The girl put her finger on the lower X. "This is the camp."

"And the other cross?"

"Talbert said something about a discovery."

The two trappers exchanged startled glances.

The girl stared at them in astonishment. "What does it mean?"

"It means," said Bret, "that they found gold, all right."

III

THEY put in the evening making up a pack of food for the girl's long walk to Fond du Lac. Once Bret's hand touched the girl's. Startled, the two fell apart.

Suddenly the girl looked up. "I'm ever so grateful to you."

He met her eyes. "It's what I want to do. Sorry I can't go with you to the post, but the other—"

"I know. Oh, I hope you can help the others." When he only nodded she added in a low voice, "I'll be back, of course. You—you'll be here?"

"Be watching for you." He frowned. "Don't come back alone. Wait for your father.

"You'll be in danger?"

"Some, maybe."

She touched his arm with her fingers. "Take care!"

Joe curtained off the bunk in the corner, and she turned in. Bret and Joe rolled up in blankets on the bearskins that covered the floor.

In the morning the girl set off to the south, Bret watching her slim figure until she passed out of sight. Then the two trappers headed north.

At twilight of the second day Joe paused. "Camp here, Bret?"

"Might as well." Hardin looked up at the darkening sky. "That way, we can hit the camp by good daylight."

They scouted until they found a cave sheltered from the wind. Bret collected dry wood while Joe opened their packs. They cooked and ate in silence. Joe stared into the fire then while Bret puffed on his pipe.

Joe broke the silence suddenly. "W'ich way they go, Bret?"

"Huh?" Bret took the pipe from his lips. "Oh. North. Or northwest. . . . No, probably north. Up into the Barrens."

Joe's eyes gleamed questioningly in the firelight. "W'y?"

Bret hesitated. "Well, Joe, I figure it like this. The Devil and his gang got wind of the discovery. Then they closed in on the survey party, either to jump the claim or grab what gold had been found."

Joe digested this quickly, and shook his head. *"Le Diable,* he's ask for beeg trouble if he jump the claim. W'at good can it do heem? He cannot work it long. Thees girl she goes Outside, tells of the trouble, and the Redcoats come in—lak zis!" He snapped his fingers.

Bret shook his head. "That's so, Joe, unless The Devil thinks the girl is frozen in a snowdrift."

Joe's eyes widened. "Maybe-so The Devil he theenk he's safe, no?"

Bret nodded. "But he wouldn't keep the survey crew around the camp. Too

risky—some trapper or prospector might come along and get a glimpse of them, and wander off to tell a Mountie.

"What I figure is that The Devil took the Morrison men to some hide-out."

"W'y not keel them all?"

Bret shook his head. "According to the girl, the gang killed only one. That must mean The Devil wants information from the others. He probably doesn't know where they struck the lode, and it would take a lot of hunting, under this snow, to find it, if the Morrison boys kept their tracks covered. He may try starving 'em to get something from 'em."

"The camp, she's empty now?"

Bret shook his head. "The Devil would probably leave one, maybe two, men with the survey party to guard them. But he'd be after the gold with the others."

"And *Le Diable*, he's in the camp."

"We'll know in the morning." Bret tapped his pipe on the rock.

THE two stirred early, rolled blankets and ate a hasty breakfast. They threaded through the ravines toward the river. Going downhill and moving fast, they soon sighted the camp beside the frozen Chipman.

It was small—only three cabins huddled on the flat bank of the river—but it was well built. The buildings had an air of strength and solidity.

Joe shook his head. "Good for fighting if you are on the inside," he muttered sourly.

"They didn't do the survey party any good," Bret pointed out. "See anything?"

There was nothing to see. Until, as they watched, a group of men straggled out of the pines on the far side of the camp. Three men, moving slowly toward the buildings.

"Three," Joe muttered.

"I hope," said Bret slowly, "that means the other three are with the five Morrison men. If The Devil had got all he wanted out of them, he'd have shot them and left them lying in some ravine, and he'd be here with all his crew. That would make six."

"So." Joe nodded approvingly. "Then they 'ave not talk.' "

"Not yet."

Joe hefted his rifle. "We go down?"

"Better wait until they've gone inside." Bret watched the three far down the slope as they approached one of the cabins. "You can't see under those parkas. But if we wait until they're inside, we'll see shirts. And if one of 'em has a red-and-black shirt—"

"*Le Diable!*"

Bret grinned briefly. "Maybe-so."

They watched the three men file into the cabin. Presently smoke drifted up in the cold clear air from the stovepipe. Bret nudged Joe's elbow. They moved toward the cabin.

No challenge came. They stepped to the door. Joe raised his eyebrows. Bret nodded. Joe beat upon the door, and then swung it open.

They saw three men in almost ludicrous tableau. One man, from a seat facing the door, was reaching for a revolver in a holster on the wall. The other two, disturbed at their meal, sat and gaped.

Joe waved a hand largely. "*Bon jour, mes amis.* You 'ave shelter for two trappers, no?"

The one man quickly jerked his hand from the gun. Waving a hand, he indicated a bench against the wall. "Sit down. How about grub? We're getting ready to eat."

"Thanks," Bret grunted. "We're hungry, all right." He swung his pack to the floor eyeing the three as if indifferently, but appraising them keenly. The spokesman was a thick-set individual with a hard face and keen eyes under bushy brows. The others were lean, hawkish types, sprawling uncomfortably at the table, chewing bread and gazing at the table.

None of the three wore a red-black shirt.

The thick-set man puttered about the stove. "Got some stew here," he said affably. "Duck and rabbit. What are you fellas used to eatin'?" He glanced at them sharply.

"What we can get," Bret replied. "We haven't been near a white man's camp in weeks."

He thought the tension eased after he made this remark. But the heavy man had more questions.

"Come from Black Lake?" he asked a little too casually.

"Nope. From over west." Bret laid down his parka.

The two at the table glanced at one another, and grinned slyly. The heavy-set man was still curious. "Which way you headin'?"

"Down the Chipman," Bret offered. "Maybe to Great Slave country. Got a partner up there needs help."

At last the heavy-set man smiled. "Well, that's fine," he said with a chuckle. "Wish I was goin' along. Can't see nothin' here, but these two jugheads want to scratch around for gold. Optimists."

Bret and Joe grinned. "Just the three of you?" Bret asked idly.

The two at the table looked at the cook. He was peering into the stew pot as he muttered, "Well, we got a couple of pals—"

A gust of cold air swept the room and the cook whirled. Bret and Joe turned toward the door.

A tall lean man stood there, scowling at the group. Nobody spoke. After a long instant the parkaed figure shut the door, gave one sharp glance at Joe and Bret, and peeled off mittens and parka. Under the heavy fur coat he wore a red-and-black checked mackinaw.

BRET shot a swift glance at Joe. LaFleche was lolling against the wall, hands clasped behind his head restfully. But his eyes were bright, and his right hand was not far from his rifle, leaning against the wall.

The newcomer's head emerged from his parka, and Bret saw first a shock of black hair, then a lean nose and brilliant dark eyes. He directed a sharp questioning look at the cook.

"Visitors," said the cook. "Coupla trappers from west, going down the Chipman."

The tall dark man looked at Bret, and the young trapper felt himself measured by a shrewd mind. "Down the Chipman, eh? Far?"

"Maybe to the Slave," said Bret. "We got a partner there."

The tall man nodded. "Aim to stay with us over night?"

Bret shook his head. "Got to keep moving. Our partner's sick."

He may have imagined it, but Bret thought he saw a gleam of satisfaction in the dark man's eyes. He ventured a question. "Trapping?"

The dark man grinned cynically. "Not for me," he said. "You can skin for your money if you like. I'd rather dig."

"Gold, eh?"

"Gold." The dark man gestured to the table, and the three drew the bench forward and sat down. "Anyway, we're looking for gold." He turned and faced Bret. "My name," said calmly, "is Talbert."

"By gar!" Joe exclaimed.

There was an instant hush in the room. The dark man stared at Joe. But LaFleche, covering up his momentary astonishment, seemed not to notice that he was the object of all eyes. He was leaning toward the stove and sniffing appreciably the savory fragrance of the stew.

Bret spoke calmly. "We heard that name," he said.

The dark man slowly transferred his attention to Bret. "Oh!"

"Some Indian or other," said Bret, "heading northwest from Fond du Lac."

The cook heaved a sigh. The dark man's eyes, still fixed with burning intensity on Bret, became veiled. "I suppose he told you we made a strike," he chuckled as if at a rare joke.

Bret shook his head, grinning. "He didn't seem to think much of your chances. Remember, Joe?—we asked him if your party had found any gold, and he said, 'No findum. Damfool.'"

The dark man chuckled again. He finished his meal and sat back. Joe and Bret filled their pipes and smoked calmly. The cook and the two silent men stirred restlessly. At length Bret reached for his parka.

"Going so soon?" asked the dark man.

"Got to make time," drawled Bret. "Long way to go." He stood up, drawing on his mittens. "Much obliged for the meal."

"Glad to have you," assured the thickset cook. He was about to say more, but caught a look from the dark man and set his lips. The two men still at the table watched the dark man. The leader lounged near the door.

Joe picked up his rifle. "You fellers come up to Great Slave, we give you musk-ox steak," he grinned.

The dark man smiled tightly. "Good enough."

Joe opened the door, held it for Bret, then followed out into the open. The two set off to the northwest, along the river.

When they were well past the camp, still tensed for any sound behind them, Joe grunted. "W'ich way?"

"Down the river," Bret muttered, listening for sounds. They reached the first cover, and he shot a look behind them. He had a brief glimpse of a face at the cabin window. They walked on past the scrub pines.

"You think they bushwhack us?" asked Joe.

"No. They swallowed our story, most likely. They're glad to see us go, and glad to know we're headed 'way north."

Joe spat. "That feller, he has plenty gall."

"Calling himself Talbert? He took a chance on our knowing Talbert. But it was smart. He's probably planning to use Talbert's papers. If a Mountie happened along, everything would seem to be on the level. Unless," Bret added, "the Mountie happened to know Talbert. In which case they'd be one less Mountie."

They plodded on over the flat river bank, heading northeast. Bret tried to remember the indicated distance between the camp X on the girl's map and the X marked with the Discovery date. Ten miles out, he began to study the trail. Joe noted his quick side glances, but said nothing, only watching the trail himself.

After another two miles Bret slowed up. "Look to your left, Joe."

Joe stared. There were no footprints, but the snow crust had been broken as by sled runners. Drifting snow had all but obscured the marks.

"Somebody been in there," Joe decided. "W'y?"

"Remember the X on the map?" asked Bret. "Somewhere in there is Discovery."

Joe stared at the wall of evergreen, half covered with snow. "By gar," he muttered. He quickened his pace. "How far we go?"

"A few miles farther," Bret decided. "Then we circle west, and pick up the tracks that our counterfeit Mister Talbert made on his way to camp this morning. If we backtrack—"

"We find the real Mister Talbert."

IV

THEY quickened their pace until they came to rising ground, with trees standing close to the river bed. By silent consent they halted, drawing under the trees, and studied the trail behind them. There was no sign of pursuit.

"Let's turn off here," Bret suggested. Joe nodded. They chose a flat ridge bare of trees, with a hard crust that would show little trace of their passing. They moved away from the river carefully, looking behind them to make sure their tracks on the hard crust would soon disappear as the sun melted the scuffings made by their boots. Once into the hills they moved swiftly.

Swinging west and south, they scanned the ravines as they passed them, particularly those that seemed likely paths toward the barrens. At length they found tracks.

Bret shook his head. "One man went this way. The big party—The Devil and his five men and the five of the survey party—went some other way."

Joe nodded at the snow. "Fresh," he pointed out. The tracks were fairly new—one set of footprints pointing west, a second set toed toward the river. "Thees *Diable*, maybe-so he take a short cut, eh?"

Bret disagreed. Joe argued. He proposed they separate, Joe to follow these tracks west, Bret to push on in further search.

Bret rejected the plan. "We'd lose too much time getting together again." He looked at the tracks. "All right, let's follow 'em in."

They struck west. At times, on hard crust, they had to range to left and right to keep to the trail. But always the tracks, however faint, reeppeared. They came to the flat bed of a snaking ravine and were rewarded for their pains.

Here was plenty of track. Many pairs of boots had bit into the snow here. In places the snow crust was dented. Joe was jubilant. "Now we see!"

But all they saw, for two hours, were breath-taking climbs and winding twists that slowed their pace. For now they went forward guns in their hands. As they entered a ravine some instinctive warning made Bret stop short. Joe, too, halted.

"She's close now, I theenk," he muttered.

They moved forward cautiously. Suddenly Bret stopped. "I had a feeling something would show up," he said, and pointed to a small pine off the trail. Waist-high on its trunk was a new blaze—a mark chopped into the tree. It resembled a pair

of butterfly wings, or the head of a double-bitted ax.

"She's fresh," said Joe.

"Just made," Bret agreed. "That must mean that The Devil's men don't know the trail, or he wouldn't have set the sign up for them. The ones still on the river, I mean."

Joe nodded. "But the trail, she's easy." He pointed down to the marked snow crust.

As they went on, however, the trail was not so easy. The boulder-set hills of the ravine crowded closer, and here and there a slide of snow obscured the tracks entirely. They came to a point where the ravine forked.

"W'ich way?" asked Joe blankly.

Bret was just as puzzled. The tracks were gone. Drift snow lay in both forks of the ravine. They followed the left fork for several yards without picking up the tracks. Retracing their steps, they tried the right fork. Still no tracks.

Suddenly Bret noticed a small boulder near his feet. "Look," he said. On the face of the boulder, scratched perhaps with the head of a hand ax, was The Devil's blaze. The same design of the ax-head which they had seen on the tree.

Grunting in satisfaction, Joe pushed on. And now he carried his rifle before him, a mittened finger near the trigger.

THE ravine, now a canyon, showed no sign of occupancy. And the chance of finding footprints, or sled tracks, was a slim one; for the sun shone down here only briefly during the day, and thus the snow was loose and drifted freely. But if there was no visible sign of danger, Bret Hardin's senses urged him to caution. And he scanned not only the footing and the canyon walls but also the sky above.

It was well he did so. His eye caught sight of a smudge of smoke. He grasped Joe's arm.

Joe followed his own glance, and shifted his rifle to the ready position in his arms. He stared at the canyon walls for a moment. "Mus' be a cave, I theenk, Bret," he said. "Thees fellows 'ave a fire, and the smoke. . . . Close, now."

They went forward slowly, trying to make their steps silent on the snow. To Bret the cr-runch of the snow under their heels sounded loud enough to alarm men half a mile away.

Joe was eyeing the smoke, and now it seemed that they must be just below it. Yet there was no sign of a cave. There was, however, a jutting out of the canyon wall, and Bret, waving Joe to stand, softly moved toward the outcrop. And here he found what they were seeking.

The outcrop was hollow, and was actually a flap of rock that hid a tunnel. Bret watched its black mouth and listened. There was no sound, and he motioned Joe forward.

Joe's eyebrows went up. He studied the tunnel entrance, then nodded questioningly. Bret went forward with Joe at his heels.

There was no sentry in sight down the tunnel, which seemed pitch dark. But Bret was not fooled. He waited just inside the entrance until their eyes, blood-shot and weakened by the miles of snowy waste they had crossed, became accustomed to the gloom. Then he saw that twenty feet ahead was a bend in the tunnel, the rock face of the bend being dimly illuminated by some light far back.

They reached the bend and peered ahead. The tunnel widened and its roof flared upward to a high cavern. One corner of the cavern, half-lit by flickering flame, was in sight, and Joe's fingers closed on Bret's arm just as Bret saw a figure prone on the floor of the cave. The figure stirred as they watched, and they saw it was a man with his wrists bound and held awkwardly before him.

They inched forward. They saw a second figure, prone, then two more sitting with their backs against the far wall of the cave. Then they saw the small fire, in the center of the cave, and beyond it, a man with his feet braced wide, prodding with a rifle muzzle a man sitting dejectedly upon a keg.

Bret felt Joe's forward motion, and was just in time to stop him. He put his lips close to Joe's ear. "There's another guard somewhere." Joe relaxed sheepishly. He waited for Bret to edge nearer the cave, and was all but out of the tunnel before he spotted the second guard, squatting against the near wall, watching the rifleman.

"How long yuh gonna keep yer trap shut, Talbert?" the rifleman was saying. "It ain't gonna help yuh none. . . . Where's the gold?"

Bret leaned back, beyond sight of the rifleman and his captive, and touched Joe. He pointed in the direction of the rifleman, then tapped his own chest with his thumb. Joe nodded. Bret pointed again, indicating the near but unseen wall of the cave, and pointed to Joe. LaFleche nodded again.

They leaped together into the cave, and Bret rasped, "Drop your guns!"

The rifleman whirled, and his movement all but lined up his muzzle with Bret's chest. His finger tightened on the trigger of his forty-five. But he held his fire.

To the left of the fire Bret heard sudden rustling. The four bound men were stirring. Bret dared not look at them, or at the other guard. That one was Joe's job. And Joe was doing it, for he heard the fellow's gun fall to the rock floor.

"Awf!" the sitting guard gasped. "Mounties!"

The man with the rifle, motionless, had been watching Bret like a hawk. Now he gave a short laugh. "Mounties, me eye!" he sneered. "These two bums are just claim-jumpers like—well, claim-jumpers." He blinked bright beady little eyes in a face that seemed to be all beard, and a note of cunning crept into his voice. "Mebbe we can make a deal." He looked inquiringly at Bret.

"No deal," said Bret flatly. "And you'd better drop that rifle."

The bearded man hesitated. Then he essayed bravado. "Look, mister. I guess you don't know who we are. Devil Sain's running this job!"

Bret started. Devil Sain! He knew that name—

The bearded man had succeeded in his purpose. As Bret stood digesting this information the bright little eyes flashed and the rifle muzzle swung. The guard fired.

BRET swayed to his right, feeling the guard's bullet pluck at his parka as he pulled trigger. The two shots sounded like a double clap of thunder in the cave, rebounding from the rock walls in deafening echoes. Then as Bret watched, the bearded man's eyes opened wide. His rifle slipped from his hands and he sagged at the knees, twisted and fell face down.

Bret darted a glance at the other guard. His hands were up, his thin face pale and strained, and his eyes were now on Joe LaFleche's rifle. That one was safe. Bret looked at the man on the keg.

Without a word Talbert, coming out of a stupor of surprise, slid off the keg and grabbed the fallen rifle. Then he turned the bearded man over. "He's dead," he said in mild surprise.

"Tie that one up, Joe," Bret directed. He came forward. "So you're Talbert."

The chief of the survey party, Bret saw, was a gray-haired man of fifty with a fine-chiseled face, worn now by strain and worry. "I'm Talbert."

"I'm Bret Hardin, trapper. And my friend over there is Joe LaFleche, trapper."

Talbert seemed puzzled. "How did you get into this mess?"

"We met Miss Morrison."

"She's safe!" Talbert's face lit up.

"Ought to be." Bret assured him. "She's on the Fond du Lac trail now to get word to her father. Just before he died Alec warned her to get word to her father. Said something about a devil."

"Good old Alec. Too bad he couldn't tell her what we know now. There were six in the gang. We were disarmed before we realized what was going on. They killed Alec. Then the leader and these two thugs brought us here."

"Time we thought of getting out of here. Sain may be back."

"Sain?"

"The leader of the gang. He went down to the Chipman."

"Sain," Bret muttered.

"You know him?"

Bret shook his head absently. "We saw him, Joe and I, down at your camp. I'd never seen him before. But I've heard of him. Devil Sain!"

Talbert nodded. "That's what these two called him. Who is he?"

"An old-timer in the North. Claim-jumper, sluice thief. Shot a merchant in the Yukon a year ago, and the Mounties have been looking for him. It was understood he'd hopped the Border into Alaska."

"That was a misunderstanding."

Every head in the cave jerked up.

The voice had come from the tunnel, and it was the voice of Devil Sain. Cool and mocking, disdainfully challenging. Sain—the tall dark man of the river camp—stood spread-legged where the tunnel opened into

the cave. In his right hand he held a big revolver.

He glanced at Bret Hardin and laughed softly. "I had a hunch about you two trappers. Trappers, eh? Did you think you could fool me? Why, nobody heads for the Slave with the fur season this far gone!" His grin disappeared, and his eyes glinted coldly. His voice took on an edge. "Who are you?"

Bret shrugged. "Trappers."

Sain scowled. "So that's your story. Have it your way. But you know what can happen to interferring fools in these parts—especially when they stand between a good man and a ledge of gold."

"The gold's a pipe dream, I keep telling you," Talbert cut in quietly.

Sain's lip curled. "You keep telling me," he mocked. "But I hear things from other quarters."

"Even if there's gold down there," observed Bret coolly, "you couldn't keep the claim jumped long."

"Yep, that's right," Evans chimed in hotly. "You're about through, Sain. The girl got away. She'll have the Mounties—"

His voice trailed away at a lightning glance from Talbert. But the harm was done.

Devil Sain's fingers whitened with their clutch on the gun. His whole body was tense. His black eyes, glowing with quick threat, swept from Evans to Talbert, and back to Hardin. "Got away?" he grated.

"Got away," Bret said coolly. "She's probably pulling into Fond du Lac about now."

Sain's face congested. Bret could sense the man's fear of his plan's failure. For a moment he hoped he had convinced Sain of his danger. But the outlaw was cunning and clear-headed.

"Fond du Lac, eh?" he muttered at last. "It's nine days to Fond du Lac. You must have met her on the trail. She can't be more than half way. Huh!" His devil grin came back. "She's not so far that I can't catch her. Chet!" he called to his still-bound henchman. "Get over here."

The man scurried across the cave. Sain quickly untied him, still watchful of Bret and Joe. "Get my team out," he told him. The runty man slithered toward the rear of the cave.

"She's got too good a start, Sain," Bret drawled. "Your best bet is to make for the Barrens before the Mounties show up."

Sain's lip curled. "She's done for. You don't know my dogs." As he spoke there was a sudden yapping and snarling and from the gloom of the rear of the cave a tangle of dogs came into sight, pulling the handler with them toward the open canyon. They halted, milling about, when the runty man tied the leader to a racing sled against the wall of the cave.

Bret's heart sank. He had tried to occupy Devil Sain's attention, to give Joe, who had been freeing Willis when the outlaw appeared, a chance to reach his rifle and get in a quick shot. But Sain was a cool hand; not for a moment had he relaxed his vigilance.

First, though, he had one matter to attend to. As the runty man fastened the lead dog, Sain gave him new orders. "Tie 'em up again. Tie 'em all up."

It was the last chance, and Joe clutched at it. As the small man started toward a discarded rope, momentarily shielding Joe, the big trapper lunged for his rifle. In the same instant Bret fumbled for the revolver in his shoulder holster.

Sain's two shots blended into one, echoing off the cave walls like thunder. In a haze of pain Bret saw Joe stagger and fall. Then the cave walls faded into blankness.

V

SOMETHING was holding Bret Hardin's face to the rock floor of the cave. He tried to raise his head, and the pain that followed left him weak. He tried again, slowly, and realized that it was his own congealed blood that glued his cheek to the rock. He jerked up.

Instantly he felt a pressure on his outstretched hand. He rolled his head and looked up. Near him, sitting on the rock chair, was Talbert, hands bound in his lap, his eyes on Bret. The survey chief jerked his head.

Bret followed the direction of the nod. The runty guard sprawled dozing against the wall a few feet away. Bret's eyes flashed understanding at Talbert. He looked around the cave. Johnson, Willis and Jones were sleeping, their roped hands beside them in awkward positions, their forms obscure in the dim light of the fire.

A plan came to Bret. He glanced meaningly at Talbert, then jerked his head first at the fire, then at the guard.

Talbert puzzled over the unspoken message. Then his face cleared. He spoke complainingly. "Hey! You with the gun!"

The guard stirred and blinked. "Wh-whuzzat?"

"If you don't get some wood," growled Talbert, "you'll freeze along with the rest of us."

The guard scowled at the diminishing fire. The warning penetrated his sleep-fogged brain. Muttering, he scrambled to his feet and ambled toward the rear of the cave.

In a flash Bret was on one knee. The dizzying pain of the head wound all but felled him, but he swayed to his feet. "I'll douse the fire," he whispered in Talbert's ear, "then jump him in the dark." Without waiting for Talbert's nod he reached for the half-filled water pail.

Talbert's whisper reached him as the glowing coals sizzled and the room went dark. "He thinks you're dead."

"He'll get a shock," Bret answered softly.

In a moment he heard the footsteps of the guard. They slowed, and stopped. Then came muttered curses. The steps came on, haltingly, and stopped again. The sound of firewoord dropping to the floor located the guard. A match flared.

Bret saw the guard look about, and freeze, when his eyes fell upon the spot where Bret had lain. Bret tensed, ready for a leap. Luck was with him. The match went out.

Before the guard could light another, Bret jerked the tobacco pouch from his pocket and cast it a dozen feet away. He was unprepared for what followed.

The guard, terrified, pulled his gun and fired at the source of the sound. Bret counted six shots. The gun was empty.

In the darkness he groped for the runty man. His hand touched a wrist, and he brought his other hand over and wrenched the gun from the man's grasp. Gripping the barrel, he swung fiercely.

The first blow did the work.

Bret lit one of his own matches. By its light he saw the guard's sightless eyes glazing. He moved to Talbert's side, took a look at the knot in the rope binding Talbert's wrists, shook out the match and freed him in the dark. Then he lit another match, and as Talbert took it from him he sank to the floor, his hands to his aching head.

Talbert lit a sliver of kindling and soon had a fire going. He went over to the guard, felt for a pulse and came back. "He's dead. How do you feel?"

"Not bad." Cautiously Bret ran a finger over the edges of his wound. The bullet had creased the side of his head. Apparently the flow of blood had convinced Sain that his bullet had finished Bret.

Talbert freed his companions and returned to Bret's side. Evans, chafing his hands, began to make coffee. Willis and Johnson went to bend over Joe.

"How is he?" asked Bret.

"Bullet through the shoulder. He'll be all right if we can get him away to where we can take care of him. How about his cabin?"

Bret shook his head. "Sain's down that way."

Talbert sobered. "The camp, then?"

"Three armed men there. . . . See if there are any guns in his place.

Talbert, Willis and Johnson searched while Evans poured coffee for Bret. They found only the guard's big revolver, empty. And they could find no cartridges.

"So we're empty-handed," Bret concluded. "Can't tackle the camp." He looked up suddenly. "Any diggings at Discovery?"

Talbert started. "You knew about that?"

"The girl told us a little. We guessed the rest. Saw sled tracks about twelve miles down the river from the camp. Is that it?"

"That's it. And we've dug quite a shaft there. Supplies, too. Some of us stayed there nights, before it turned cold, so we carried in food."

"Enough to last a couple of weeks?"

Talbert nodded. "Plenty."

"Then let's make for the shaft. After we get Joe there, you and your men can make for Black Lake and get word out. I'll stay and take care of Joe."

"Willis and Johnson can go," Talbert decided. "Evans and Jones and I will stay. Might be of use."

Bret let it go at that. They found a sled upon which they stretched the half-

conscious Joe LaFleche, and left the cave.

They had covered a mile when Bret slowed, turned to Talbert and waved a hand. "You go on. I'm going to stay."

The survey chief stared. "What for?"

"I figure it this way," Bret explained. "When Sain comes back he'll head for the hideout—with or without the girl. I want to be there when he shows up."

Talbert looked grave. "You're unarmed. Can't we go at this some other way?"

Slowly Bret shook his head. "If the girl got away that's all right. But suppose he caught up with her? He'll be taking her to the hideout. And what'll happen when he gets there and finds us gone? He'll know then that his game is up. In a panic, he'd probably kill the girl."

Talbert said no more. He gave Bret a quick handshake, then followed the men with the sled. Bret turned and slowly retraced his steps to the cave.

IT was a long wait. Bret foraged at times for wood and food. For water he had to leave the cave and break the ice over a pool in the rock.

It was dark when they came. Bret heard the barking of dogs. In a flash he was up and running to the cave mouth. He saw them at once. The team had just rounded a twist in the canyon. He watched breathlessly as the sled came into view. There was a bundle on it, covered with furs. Supplies? Or the girl?

Sain ran behind the sled, one hand on the guide pole. At the entrance to the cave he shouted to the dogs, which quickly sank into the snow. Then Sain parted the coverings on the sled.

The girl sat up. Sain jerked her to her feet and half dragged her out of the bed. "Welcome to my castle," he said mockingly. "I hope you'll like it well enough to stay."

The girl said nothing. Her chin up, she gave him a straight look, then stood waiting for his orders.

He gestured to the cave. "Inside with you." Then he laughed mockingly. "You're about to meet some of your friends."

Bret, gripping the empty revolver he had taken from the guard, flattened himself against the cave wall behind a stack of empty crates.

He heard the scrape of Sain's boots as the gold pirate came through the tunnel, and the light footfall of the girl. Abruptly the footsteps ceased, and Bret knew that Sain was taken aback at finding the cave seemingly empty.

"The fools," he heard Sain mutter. "Gone to the camp." His voice rose. "Here you are, girl. And here you'll stay, until we've cleaned your gold pocket of every nugget."

For the first time the girl spoke. "You're stupid," she said bravely, though there was a tremor in her voice. "If you stay, you'll be hanged for Alec's murder."

Sain laughed mockingly. "And who's to hang me?"

"Bret Hardin," the girl retorted. "And Joe LaFleche."

There was a moment's tense silence. Then Sain's voice came gratingly. "Much they can do. I'm holding them. I told you that."

Bret had judged from the source of the voices that the girl stood apart from Sain, free of the danger of a flying bullet. He moved into the firelight.

"Stand still, Sain."

The bandit whirled, one hand lifted toward his gun. Then he froze in that position. Bret had seen the girl in one swift glance, her hands clasped, her eyes great pools of fear and hope. After that one look he held his eyes on Sain.

"You're all through, Sain. Get your hands up."

Sain stood motionless, his bold black eyes roving over Bret, his quick mind working fast. Reluctantly his hands rose a trifle above his waist. Then in a flash he leaped backward and sidewise, seeking the shelter of the girl's body.

Fear gripped Bret. As he sprang forward he saw that the girl, in a paralysis of excitement, had not moved. Desperately Bret flung his empty gun at the bandit's head.

He missed. But the attempt saved his life. For Sain, with a quick draw, sent a bullet toward Bret. The flying gun spoiled Sain's aim.

Then Bret was upon him, one big hand gripping Sain's gun hand, the other groping for his throat. Sain's fingers snaked out, prodding at Bret's eyes. Bret ducked, brought his head up sharply to Sain's chin,

and the bandit staggered.

The black eyes flashed evilly, and Sain's left hand swung up and raked Bret's eyes. He swayed, and Sain, with a great heave, swung his gun into play and fired. The shot seared Bret's face. He felt his strength, drained by the head wound and Sain's punishing blows, failing.

He all but fell when Sain kicked viciously at his feet. When he swayed erect he put one last effort into a heave forward. They fell, Bret on top. Instantly he ground a knee into Sain's left elbow and, pulling his right hand away from its grip, fumbled for Sain's gun.

It was needless effort. Sain, his head having cracked hard against the rock, was unconscious. Bret bound him firmly with his own belt, then sat down with a sigh.

The girl was beside him. "You're wounded!"

"It's nothing much. Everything's—all right now."

"Did you find—"

"Yes. Talbert and Evans, Johnson, Willis, Jones. They're all safe. Joe's hurt. He'll pull through. . . . He caught you?"

"Yes." The girl's eyes fell. "I guess I'm an awful greenhorn."

"Kinda green," Bret admitted with a feeble grin. "But you oughta season well."

The girl's eyes began to glow. A timid hand touched his forehead.

OLD Man Morrison looked around at the camp. Smoke was rising from every building on the river bank, and there was a haze of smoke, too, above Discovery, down the river. He took the cigar from his mouth and gestured with it. "Going to be a big thing, Bret," he remarked. "Why not stay on here with us?"

Bret grimaced. "I tried gold mining. Lost my shirt."

"Wildcatting around, eh?" Morrison nodded. "Well, that's all we were doing. But we struck it. Think it over. There's a future here."

Bret shot a glance at the girl, standing beside them. She smiled shyly, her eyes on his face.

"Maybe-so," he agreed. "Guess there might be a future here at that."

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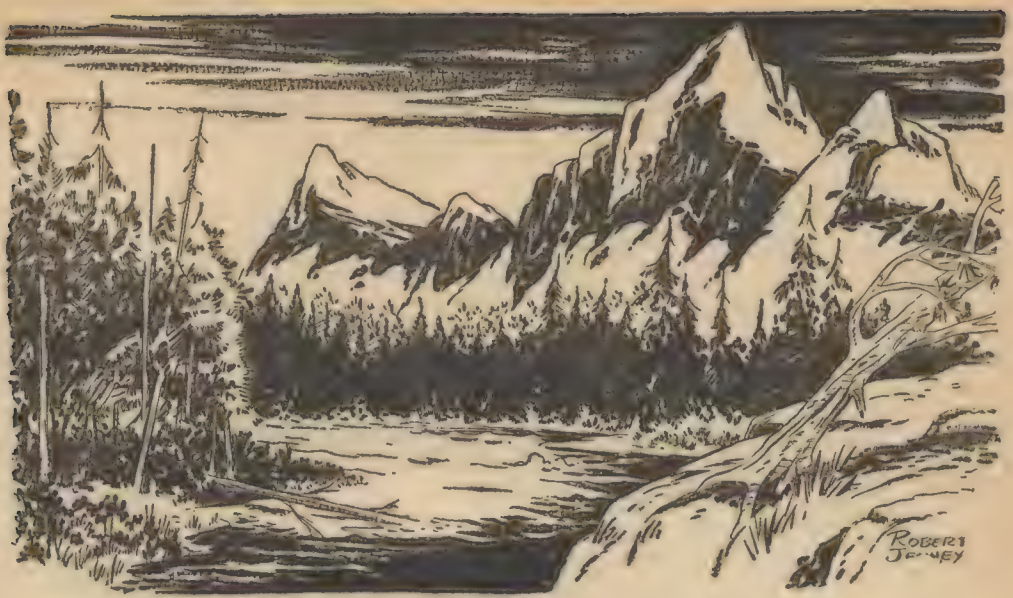

SNOW MAN

By FRANK DUFRESNE

Forget his roarin' and rantin' agin the snow, Brother Sourdough, and bet your poke that old Nebo will never quit the land of ice and cold.

GO AHEAD, YOU FROST-eaten old sourdoughs, hint all you want to; Pete Nebo isn't going to be chased out of the country. Talk all you want to about sunny California and Florida. Tell Pete about the orange trees. It won't do any good. In spite of your good intentions Pete Nebo calculates on spending the rest of his days right here on the shore of Bering Sea. When he dragged up a raft of driftwood logs for a cabin forty years ago, chinked the walls with moss and laid on a roof of live sod off the tundra, Pete meant business. He knew what he was doing. He was building himself a home for keeps.

Call Pete crazy behind his back if it will make you any happier. Tell everybody he's touched on the subject of snow. You'll get no argument out of me. But when you try to talk him into pulling stakes for the south before he misses too many boats, you're plumb wasting your time. Because Pete just isn't going.

I'm not defending Pete Nebo, mind you. I've seen him do as many queer things as the rest of you. I've seen him standing out in front of his cabin in September, shaking his fist at the first thin spit of a blizzard sweeping in from Bering Sea, yelling loud enough to start the malemutes howling over in Eskimo town. Come next May, I've heard him fighting the last, softly-falling flakes of the winter season. Between times, during the February snow moon for instance, I've known Pete to cut loose with blue-tinted gems of such fire as to start the icicles on his cabin dripping.

Pete Nebo hate snow? He never lets you think any different. And yet, you have to admit there isn't a better dog musher in all the north country. He has traveled more than any of you; owns as fine a string of huskies as ever pulled a sled. Did you ever follow a better man on snowshoes? Let Pete slip his mukluk-shod feet onto a pair of his own home-made webs and he'll fade away like he was wearing wings. Hating snow like you claim he does, you have to admit he has studied all its tricks and likes nothing better than to show it who is boss.

Ever since I made that three thousand

mile trip to his old claims on the Innoko, I think I know more about his snowphobia than any among you. You can't live with a man for four months like I did without picking up an idea or two. You're bound to catch him off guard if you wait long enough. To my way of thinking, Pete practically let the cat out of the bag one night, and I think I ought to tell you neighbors how it came about.

DAY in and day out I trudged along a freshly-broken trail through ever-falling snow, eyes glued to Pete's plaid windbreaker bobbing along ahead. Even with him leading the way it was hard going because Pete set such an unmerciful pace. No matter how cold the morning, it took only a few minutes on the trail for Pete to get himself warmed into the job. Pretty soon off would come his fur parka. Then, like as not, if the glass showed no more than twenty below, he'd peel off his plaid windbreaker, too. When Pete's gray head was exposed to the cold and the frost crystals started forming on his black wool undershirt, he'd burn up the trail like nobody I've ever been out with before.

Don't think I'm starting to brag about Pete Nebo, because I'm not. I'll admit that you couldn't ask for a more efficient, hard-working snow man; but as a trail mate he was the World's worst grouch. Always grumbling about something. "If we had the sense God give a whistle-pig, we wouldn't be doin' this," he would announce after a spell of brooding silence. "We'd be holed up some'eres waitin' for Spring." If he said this once, he said it a thousand times.

Down in the Iditarod flats we jumped a moose from its bed and watched it stampede away through six feet of powdery fluff, throwing clouds of snow like a rotary plow. It was a pretty sight as you could hope to see. But not for Pete. "Wolf fodder," he observed moodily. "Pore critter ain't got a chance in this damnable snow."

One night after snowshoeing furiously through a smothering downfall since early morning to reach a log shelter he'd built a few years back, Pete was wild enough to be clamped in a straitjacket when he found the hut occupied by an Indian trapper. When he pushed open the door and saw the Indian making himself at home, Pete's mop of iron-gray hair stood on end like hackles on a fighting sled dog. No telling what might have happened if the Indian hadn't tamed Pete with his very first remark. One of his Great Spirits must have put the exact words in that dusky trapper's mouth.

"No good!" he grunted emphatically. "Too much snow. Lose traps. No damn good!"

Pete's anger slid away like water off a loon's back. He warmed to the Indian like they were old friends. "You said it, Johnny. 'No good!' "

He bustled around more cheerful than I had seen him for weeks. While I unrolled the sleeping bags and tried to find a place to spread them among the Indian's smelly gear, Pete dragged in the grub-box and whipped up a meal of bacon, beans and sourdough biscuits which he insisted on sharing with Indian Johnny.

" 'No good' is right,' he repeated after a while as we sat humped in the flickering light of the rusted-out, camp stove. "Me, I can't even ketch a snowshoe rabbit for the mulligan pot. Every snare I set is buried clean out o' sight come mornin'. Next time I try it, I'm goin' to hang the danged loops high up in the bushes as I can reach, figin' the rabbits'll be snowed up to 'em before daylight."

Pete was almost sociable that night. But his experience with the ptarmigan next day threw him into the dumps all over again. What happened when Pete tried to catch the ptarmigan is one of the reasons why I'm willing to agree with you fellows when you claim he is slightly on the queer side. But just the same you're not going to get him to leave Alaska. Mind that.

It was still snowing, of course, when we hitched up the sled dogs and started from the trapper's shack. We hadn't gone more than a mile or two when the ptarmigan—like they often will during a storm—left its perch on a high willow ahead and plummeted straight down out of sight in the new snow. In the five minutes it took us to reach the spot all you could see was a slight hump showing on the surface. Pete waved me back while he snowshoed ahead until the toes of his webs were within a yard of the hump. He loosened the harnesses from his mukluks and made ready

like a man on a springboard.

Queer? Well, maybe. The chances are that Pete had it all figured how he was going to catch the bird in his bare hands. But he didn't bother to explain and in a minute it was too late. When he dove headfirst into the bank there was an explosion of wings in his face, a flurry of white and the ptarmigan went rocketing away through the trees leaving Pete with a handful of feathers and a bloody nose.

You could see that Pete's pride was hurt even worse than his nose. It wasn't soothed any, either, when the squirrel got away from him. It was as if the snow was deliberately playing tricks on him.

The squirrel episode came about when Pete sunk his axe into a scrub spruce for camp wood. The instant the squirrel felt the tingling thud of the axe it started chattering. With every stroke it scurried higher up the tree until it finally hung on the topmost spire. Pete was pretending not to notice what was going on, but when the next blow fetched the squirrel out of the tree in a wild jump into space, he shuffled right over to the spot where it landed in the deep snow and started grabbing in the loose fluff for it.

I guess that squirrel must have dropped clear through to the ground and crawled into a hole because Pete never turned up a hair of it. Long after he should have had the fire going in the tent he was still out there floundering around and muttering to himself. If he'd known what he was going to be up against in the next few hours, I guess Pete would have sounded off even worse.

THAT night there was almost a foot of snow on the tent when we crawled into the sleeping bags. In the last couple of hours the weather had moderated so that the snow was beginning to load up with moisture. It wasn't a bit like the feathery stuff we had been swimming through for so many miles. This snow had substance and heft to it.

Afterward, Pete loudly accused me of causing all the trouble. He said I must have rolled around and knocked down the poles. But I'm telling you fellows I did nothing of the sort. I was sound asleep when it happened. Everything seemed to let go all at once. The first thing I know, the tent with its sopping-wet burden collapsed on us. I don't have to tell you that when Pete came clawing his way up out of the tangled ropes and canvas he was spewing snow and roaring like a gun-shot grizzly.

I hope none of you neighbors ever try to tell Pete that he can't do anything about the snow. He knows better. Matter of fact, he might even admit he overdid the job that night down in the Innoko country; he made it quit snowing and start raining. It was no little pitty-patty rain, either, but the kind that comes down like someone had kicked the tail gate loose on a sluice box. Before morning the whole valley was covered with watery slush, the river bed filled from bank to bank. We had to take to the brush along the slopes, bogging to the waist at every step.

It wasn't until we had put up the tent that next night when I suddenly realized Pete Nebo wasn't doing any more talking. Not a word came out of him during the long hours we spent in trying to dry out our soaked clothes over the little sheet-iron stove. He seemed to be awed by his own power, like he was entirely responsible for the freakish weather but wasn't quite sure how it was all going to turn out. Meanwhile, he figured he better keep still.

Looking back on it now, I have to admit that if it wasn't Pete who was controlling the weather that week, it must have been someone else with fairly radical ideas on the subject. On the second night a big white moon came riding up over the far mountains to shut off the rain. Inside of an hour it had chased every cloud out of the sky and sent the mercury skidding into the bottom of the glass.

When the sun took over next morning, its rays glinted on a world coated with crystal clear ice. Every bush and tree was weighted down with Christmas sparklers. But if Pete had an eye for the brilliance of the scenery he didn't mention it aloud. Instead, he pounded the ice out of the canvas tent and loaded it on the sled in dogged silence. Like a pair of deaf mutes we harnessed the dogs and got underway for the final run to his cabin on the upper Innoko.

Not once did Pete raise his voice that day. The willow bushes dumped buckets of cracked ice on his head as he forced a trail

through them. The slippery soles of his mukluks flew into the air and let him down with spine-jarring thuds. He was bruised and battered by the time we reached the cabin. But he bore it all with stoicism.

Pete's cabin on the Innoko was a comfortable place and there was no reason for him to be in such a dreary mood. He watched the white flocks of ptarmigan struggling to feed on the ice-coated willow buds, and the squirrels clinging desperately to the slippery boughs of the spruces, from the cabin window for hours at a time, a depressed man if I ever saw one. The spark seemed to have gone out of him. Give him snow, I thought, and he could fight back with a blistering vocabulary unmatched in the north. But for this kind of winter weather he had little gift for description. It seemed to me that the snow, washing away with the rain, had also swept with it all the pungent, treasured phrases with which Pete used to belabor it.

All this, of course, I had to reason out for myself. Pete wasn't talking. You had to draw your own conclusions from the wistful way he he peered out the cabin windows, searching the sky with anxious eyes, saying nothing. It was what happened on that final night in the cabin that cinched the matter in my mind. That was when I formed my own opinion of why Pete Nebo never, never will quit Alaska no matter how much he raves about the snow; no matter how much you old sourdough cronies keep harping on sunny California.

The moon had risen clear of the ice-splattered spruces that night. Standing in the doorway, Pete studied it with profound interest for a long time. The cabin grew cold, but I thought I'd better not start anything. Besides, I had a hunch there was boing to be a break.

After a while Pete broke the silence. "Ring around the moon," he said, like he was talking to himself. "Comin' on to snow."

Then he added sort of gruffly—and this is the part I especially want you fellows to hear—*"Good thing, too."*

So, go ahead and hint all you feel like; Pete Nebo isn't going to let a little snow scare him out of Alaska. Truth is, he really likes it.

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QUEEN OF JINX TOWN

By TOM O'NEILL

When it came to fur hauling, Lou Whiting was as ruthless as a she-wolf with hunger biting its belly. Gold Creek trail was hers . . . and heaven help the trapper who ran his sleds there without the redhead's nod. Too bad Big Dan Carver never heard of her.

THE TRADING POST was wrapped in a crystalline cold that had crept down far inland from the Beaufort Sea. Inside, Dan Carver awoke with a start, his senses tensed and tingling. But it had been the creaking of a whip-sawn spruce plank somewhere, nothing more. The hard iron frost twisted them with relentless fingers all through the frozen northern night.

Sleepily, Carver listened to the sheet-iron stove murmuring as it digested its armfuls of birch chunks. By the faint red glow he could see the birch piled near the stove, the bundles of willow brush kindling he would use to start the flames roaring in the morning. Behind the stove loomed faintly the rough plank counter and the shelves of trade goods, the wimpled, mud-chinked walls.

Drowsiness swept over Carver again, and he worked his shoulders down deeper into the striped Hudson's Bay blankets, making the rawhide-lashed bunk-poles squeak a mild protset. Then the plank creaked again. Carver's eyes snapped wide open. This time it hadn't been the frost! He heard a faint scratching sound, such

as might be made by a pack-rat dragging something across the puncheon floor—or a moccasin-pac being scraped stealthily on the floor behind the plank counter!

He threw back the blankets and wheeled out of the bunk in wool underwear and socks. He went directly to the stove. The door clanged as he yanked it open, and red, shimmering light gushed forth. Like a shadow a dim form rose swiftly from behind the counter. Carver tried to meet it, to grapple with it, but he was a split second too slow.

His knuckles brushed the rough cloth of a mackinaw; he had a brief whiff of a strong whiskey breath; then the clubbed butt of a rifle came up under his chin. He reeled back, the taste of blood strong and salty in his mouth. Desperately, he tried to stop reeling, but his feet became tangled. He fell. Hazily, he saw the shadowy figure vault the counter and loom over him. The rifle butt was raised. He tried to bring leaden arms up, but couldn't get them off the floor. There was a mushrooming flash of flame, an explosion of pain. He sank into darkness.

Carver spiraled up out of the void, slowly at first, then with a panicky rush. Acrid smoke burned his nostrils and was stinging his eyes. He jackknifed into a sitting position. Dull pain smote his head but he was hardly aware of it.

A white and yellow sheet of flame writhed between him and the front entrance. The stove had been upset, the fire scattered, and his trading post was ablaze! The bunk was burning, and the fire was running up the walls in long streamers as it ate at the fuzz that coated the logs. The heat was already blistering. The crackling flames had a start nothing could stop now.

Carver scrambled stiffly to his feet and stared wild-eyed at the fire between him and the front entrance. He went around the end of the plank counter and groped through the choking smoke. The brightly colored trade blankets on the shelves were beginning to smoulder, and through the biting smell of the billowing smoke his nostrils winnowed out the unmistakable odor of kerosene. It had been liberally poured around before the stove had been shoved over and the fire scattered. The trading post had been a tinder-box, and he had been left unconscious on the floor.

There was a small door at the right of the shelves. Carver groped his way to it. He fumbled at the wooden bar-catch and rawhide loop. It stuck a little and he yanked at the bar with powerful fingers, the muscles in his wide back straining and stretching. For a panicky moment or two he thought the bar had been wedged somehow, then it gave way with a sharp crack. He shoved the door open and stumbled out into the snow and the sharp thirty-below air.

CARVER'S back crawled in anticipation of the crack of a rifle, a slug thudding into him. He plunged blindly into the thick growth of young black spruce behind the post. He had built the post backed up to the spruce thicket in order to have a wind-break, and it served him well now.

He bulled his way into the thicket, the branches crackling, raking at him and scourging his thighs and legs. He went in only a few yards, however, then crouched and waited. Nothing happened. No one had seen him dash from the burning building. He worked his way cautiously back toward the fringe of the thicket. He parted the frozen branches and peered out.

The flames had melted the snow off the roof and were breaking through, lighting up the scene with a red, angry light. The nearest trees burned like reluctant torches as branch after branch burst into flame, flaring briefly and flickered out. Carver could see three people in the shimmering light. They were standing in the snow in a tight little group, watching the destruction they had caused.

Two were clad in parka and breeches, the third in a mackinaw and sourdough breeches that bagged out over high moccasin pacs. Two were medium sized, the one in the mackinaw big and broad. All three carried rifles in mittened hands and their faces were three red blurs as they watched the flames.

Behind them were two large freight sleds piled high with baled fur. The dogs were in double tandem hitches, sixteen to a sled. The fire was making them slightly nervous in the leather traces, and they whined and made uneasy movements.

Carver cursed slowly and bitterly. The baled fur represented a season's take—

thousands of dollars. The thieves' scheme had been as sound as it was simple. He had been robbed and left to die in the fiery ruins of the post. To the observer he would have simply died in a fire that had started when he was asleep, and his fur and trade goods had gone up in smoke. Just another victim of the enemy that the north sometimes has no defense against.

Carver felt an icy shiver creep up his back, but the heat from the burning building was keeping him from freezing. He judged he had been unconscious inside for almost an hour. It would have taken the three of them at least that long to move the hundred pound bales out of the storage room and pile them on the sleds.

As he watched, one of the trio shoved back the hood of a parka. For a brief instant Carver saw the gleam of bright red hair, then the furred hood was pulled back in place. Carver cursed again, and his nails dug at the palms of his hands.

The roof finally fell in with a dull roar, sending a shower of sparks towering up into the still, sub-zero air. One of the trio yelped shrilly then, and the dogs that were lying in the traces scrambled to their feet and shook dry, powdery snow from the coarse hair of their flanks and bellies. Those already standing put weight against the breast-bands as though eager to be off.

The man who had yelled shoved on the gee-pole of the first sled and got it sliding smoothly. He yelped again, cracking the whip he had snatched from the basket of the sled. The man in the mackinaw pulled a scotch cap a little further down over his ears and started the second sled. Carver watched the flickering light pursue the heavily loaded sleds, the straining dogs and the drivers down the trail until a clump of spruce blotted them out.

Carver shivered. The heat from the burning building was subsiding now. He moved a little closer to the flames. He waited about fifteen minutes, hugging the radiating heat. Reasonably sure now that the thieves would not be returning, he stepped out of the protecting spruce.

He gazed thoughtfully at the two sod-roofed cabins about fifty yards distant. The thieves had spared them for an obvious reason. Burning them would have stamped the burn-out as arson instead of a fire of accidental origin. Carver sprinted through frozen snow toward the nearest one. Before he got there he could feel the cold clutching at his knees, numbing them, threatening to send him tumbling.

He floundered up to the door, worked the latch loose and shoved on inside. He knew just where things were. Shivering, he groped on the spruce joist just to the right of the door, found the can with matches and candles in it. With stiff fingers he lighted a candle and moved to the plank table in the middle of the square room.

He allowed some of the wax to run from the candle tip and used it to seat the base firmly. The flickering light steadied and he began to look around. This cabin was for trappers who came to the post to trade their furs and stay a day or two before returning to their lonely cabins and strung-out traplines, but it was used by an Indian trail-man from time to time also, and there were odds and ends of equipment lying around. It was from these that Carver hoped to scrape up an outfit.

A wolfskin parka hung on a wooden peg, and from under the bunk he hauled a pair of greasy buckskin breeches. There was a pair of worn mukluks also, a tattered mackinaw and rawhide mittens with rabbit fur lining. Carver dressed. On one of the shelves behind the stove he found a rusty Colt Peacemaker. He spun the cylinder and saw that only four of the chambers were loaded.

In the other cabin he found a couple of snowshoe frames and some rawhide sled lashing. He would use the lashing to restring the snowshoes and hunker near a scraped up pile of embers until dawn. Then he would start for Gold Creek.

THE marks of the two heavily loaded freight sleds led directly to the Gold Creek trail, as Carver had known they would. The gleam of the thick red hair he had seen last night had told him that! The Gold Creek trail was marked by the runners of many sleds and he could no longer pick out those of the freight sleds that bore the stolen fur, but he was certain they were being taken straight to Gold Creek.

It was late afternoon when Carver paused on the high ground above Gold Creek. He gazed down for long minutes, his breath vapor thick and white, his eyes

bitter and brooding behind slitted leather snow goggles. Gold Creek huddled in a snowy saucer surrounded by the ever encroaching spruce and balsam. Once a gold town, the last drift had been run out, the last gravel bank washed, and there was nothing but crumbling flumes and barren tailings to tell of better days. Many of the cabins had been pulled down and those remaining formed a forlorn cluster that was split in half by the trail.

Carver went down into the settlement and stopped at the roadhouse kept by a Finn, Pavo Lurmik, and his fat Cree wife. He told the Finn he wanted a bunk for the night, thawed out by the sheet-iron stove. Then, shoving the Colt .45 deep in the pocket of a borrowed mackinaw, he went back outside.

The settlement street was lined by a straggling row of log buildings. Sled marks criss-crossed, and the snow was beaten down to a glazed sheet. Dogs milled in pole pens behind the cabins and smoke wisped from blackened stovepipes. At one end of the street was a two-story trading post and across from it the Golden Slipper saloon, a bedraggled relic of the boom days Gold Creek once knew. Both were owned and operated by Lou Whiting. Men sometimes called her the queen of Gold Creek.

Carver headed for the Golden Slipper. He stepped around a sled piled with fur, glanced at it and kept on going. He pushed open a wide log door and stepped into a room filled with warmth, tobacco smoke and murmuring talk. The talk faltered and faded as he stood there, blinking his eyes to accustom them to the dimness.

He peered down along the long bar that ran the length of the room. Midway down the bar stood a woman, her back to the bar, her elbows thrust behind her and resting on the polished wood. She wore a short buckskin skirt, a fringed jacket and doeskin moccasins. Her face was wide at the temples and came to a soft, rounded point at her chin. Her cheek bones were strong, her wide eyes bold and green. And her hair was rich and red and rested thickly on her shoulders.

Slowly Carver began to move down along the bar toward the red-haired woman. Three men were playing cards at a round, baize-covered table in the pool of yellow light shed by two swinging oil lamps. Carver glanced at them, stopped in his tracks.

One of the card players was a huge Scandinavian with yellow hair, blue eyes and a hard, scarred face. A black scotch cap was shoved back on his head. Carver eyed him keenly. If his suspicions were correct, this was one of the men he had seen last night. The one who had slugged him with the rifle butt.

He called out sharply, "Swede!"

The Swede raised his eyes. His fingers spread, he dropped his cards and his mouth opened slowly. Sheer amazement glazed his blue eyes. Yellow hair dribbled out from under the scotch cap and down over fan-like ears to add to the effect of shocked astonishment. Scarred fingers with blunt, broken nails curled slowly on the table. All talking had been smothered. An expectant hush had settled.

Carver walked slowly toward the three men under the oil lamps and stopped by the baize-covered table. "What's the matter, Haagem?" he asked quietly. "You look surprised."

"Surprised? Ho, what you mean?" Swede's eyes danced uneasily.

"You look surprised to see me, that's what I mean."

"You mus' be crazy!"

"What's the matter?" Carver taunted. "Do I look like a ghost?"

A little color was coming back into the giant's face. "What you talking about, hey?" he demanded. "I think you mus' be crazy. What you trying to say?"

"When you saw me you dropped your cards." Carver reached down and with big fingers swiftly spread the cards. "A good hand, too. What made you do that?"

Swede Haagem scowled. "I don't know what you trying to do to me. Maybe you want a punch in the nose, hey?"

"Where were you last night?" Carver rapped sharply.

Haagem pounded on the table with a fist as hard as a mallet. "By golly!" he roared. "Now I know you want a punch in the nose!"

"Where were you?" Carver repeated.

The Swede's blue eyes bobbed as they met the challenge of Carver's. "Aye give a good punch in the nose, by golly! Maybe that will make you talk some sense!"

THE red-haired woman pushed herself away from the bar. Her walk in the doeskin moccasins was graceful. Her short skirt twitched and the fringed jacket swayed, and she drew the eye of every man in the room. Her green eyes were cold, and anger had tightened the lines around her wide, red mouth.

She came swiftly between Carver and Swede. "Never mind, Swede," she said crisply. "Let me handle this." Swede Haagem growled and settled back in his chair. The girl turned slowly to face Carver, her green eyes sweeping over him. "What are you trying to do here, Carver? Pick a fight?"

"Not exactly. I'm trying to pick up a little information."

"It looked to me as though you were trying to pick a fight with the Swede."

Carver's lips tightened. "I'll take care of him later. Right now I think I'd rather talk with you."

Surprise flickered across the red-haired woman's flawlessly beautiful face. "With me?"

"Yes, I want to talk with you."

The wide green eyes measured him. "Well, why not?" The girl smoothed a few wisps of red hair back off a smooth white forehead. "Go right ahead."

Carver hesitated.

"Nobody is standing in your way, Carver," the red-haired girl pointed out. "What are you waiting for?"

"I want to talk with you alone."

Thin, golden eyebrows twitched. "Alone? Now wait just a minute—"

"Yes, alone." Carver nodded at the door that opened into the room at the rear of the saloon. "In there will be all right."

"If you have anything to say to me, you can say it right here."

Their voices were crackling in a heavy silence. All eyes were funneled toward them.

"I think we had better go back there," Carver said.

"Right here is good enough for me," the woman said firmly.

"Not for what I have to say, it isn't."

"I can't stand here arguing with you all day like this. If you have something to say, out with it."

Carver took a quick step toward her. His hand shot out and grabbed a firmly moulded arm. "Back there, alone," he growled. "Let's go!"

Lou Whiting jerked her arm out of Carver's hand. She turned her head and her voice rose. "Swede! Take care of him!"

The chair crashed over backward as Haagem surged to his feet. With one sweep of a thick arm he brushed the table aside and charged at Carver.

Carver stepped back making Haagem's roundhouse swing fall short. He brought over a short, chopping blow, opening a cut under the Swede's eye. Haagem roared in rage and set himself again. Swift as a wolf springing for an uncovered throat, Carver slid forward and launched a mighty right hand punch. It caught Haagem on the jaw.

His eyes glazed like those of a beached fish, his knees buckled, all the stiffness seemed to leave him. He crashed forward on the plank floor.

Carver looked at Lou Whiting, jabbed a forefinger at the rear door. "In there!" he bellowed.

Without a word the girl turned slowly and began to walk toward the rear. Carver followed the girl through the door and closed it behind him.

THERE was a man sitting at a round table manipulating a deck of cards with supple fingers. He was small, of indeterminate age. He eyed Carver with eyes as cold and gray as Arctic seas.

"It's all right, Baird," the girl spoke up. "I want to talk with this man for a few minutes."

Baird tossed the cards on the table. "All right, Lou. I'll be handy if you want me."

"I don't think I'll be needing you," the girl said tartly. "It's about time you were getting back across the street to the post. Le Torneau is out in front and wants to do some trading."

When Baird left the room, the girl swung around to face Carver.

"All right, mister, what will it be? Don't think I was impressed by what you did to the Swede out there. I was just tired of arguing, that's all."

"You got tired arguing mighty sudden."

"Another time the Swede would tear you to pieces," the red-head said scornfully. "You landed a lucky punch!"

"Maybe."

"Well, never mind that. What do you want?"

Carver's eyes narrowed. "My fur!" he said.

The color left Lou Whiting's face, then swept back with a rush. "What do you mean by that?"

"I think you know well what I mean."

"I'm afraid I don't. You'll have to explain."

"All my furs were stolen last night. I was burned out."

"So? What has that to do with me?"

"You know nothing of it?"

Her face was inscrutable. "Indian Johnny Bill came in with the mail this morning. He had a lame dog and made camp in the bush last night. He said he saw a red glow to the north that must have been a fire somewhere. I suppose that was your trading post."

"That is all you know about it?"

The green eyes sparked again. "That's all I know about it! What am I supposed to know?"

Carver's hard, blunt fingers dug into the firm flesh of her shoulder. "It is no secret that you didn't want me here in the first place."

The girl didn't wince under the pressure of his fingers and her green-eyed gaze was stony. "That is true," she said.

"When I arrived a year ago and started to build you came to me and as much as told me to clear out. You knew I would draw off half the fur from the upper Kootenay Creeks. The Hudson's Bay people to the east, me athwart those upper valleys, your trade would be cut down to a half or a third!"

She was icily calm. "That is true enough."

"Ever since your husband died three years ago you have been eaten up by ambition. You expanded the trading post, revived the Golden Slipper. You've taken over the freighting between here and to the south, to Fort Douglas, Alder Creek, everything that moves on those trails travels on sleds owned by you."

"So I am ambitious. What of that? When my husband died he left me nothing but a twenty thousand dollar debt. I wiped that out and built up a small fortune. It is true I didn't want to see you come in! You have cut into my business terribly. But what does it all add up to?"

"Nobody can stand in your way, Lou," Carver said stonily. "You are cold and ruthless as a she-wolf with a week-old hunger biting its belly."

"Perhaps I am, but that isn't what you're trying to say. Let's hear it."

Carver let go of her shoulder. "A fire to wipe me out. A murder to make sure I wouldn't build again," he accused.

The girl's eyes were pinpoints. "Am I to understand you are accusing me of burning you out because you were hurting my business? Is that what you base it on? Just because I am the most logical one to benefit?"

"Not exactly."

"What then?"

"Did you see how shocked Swede was to see me?"

"He did seem surprised. What of it?"

"He thought he was seeing a ghost for a minute. He thought he had killed me."

Her lips barely moved as she said, "Go on."

"I saw Swede last night," Carver said. "That was after I came to my senses and stumbled out the back and hid in the spruce. I saw a smaller man—I would say that was Baird—and I saw you. You pushed back the hood of your parka and I saw your red hair in the light of the fire."

LOU WHITING was pale with rage. She sucked in a deep breath and her eyes flickered with a dangerous, greenish fire. "I think you are the most contemptible man I have ever met!" she spat out. Her fingers twined tightly together, biting at her palms, and her lips were hard and taut. "You—you—" Her voice trailed upward into a higher octave. "Ooh!" she exploded, and flung herself forward, her skirt swirling above her knees, her clawed fingers raking at Carver's face.

"I'll tear your eyes out for saying that!" she yelled.

One of her nails made an angry red scratch down one side of Carver's face. He caught her wrist. For a moment she was tight against him, writhing, straining. Her small teeth were clenched, her breath whistled and her nostrils were flaring like a frightened doe's. Carver pushed her back roughly.

For a moment it looked as though she

would fling herself forward again, but a thin, nasal voice reached her from the saloon. The girl frowned. The nasal voice rose in intensity.

"What's that?" Carver demanded.

When she made no reply, Carver went to the door, flung it open. A thin man in a greasy mackinaw and black sourdough breeches held the floor, surrounded by a circle of spectators. He had sharp cheekbones, sunken cheeks, his eyes were glowing and he had one clenched fist upraised . . . and thick, coarse, red hair dribbled out from under a fur cap.

Carver stared at the man. The red-haired man waved a bony fist. "A den of wickedness, if I ever saw one!" he ranted. "The whole pack of you ought—"

Then he saw Carver. His mouth hung open and a glassy, unbelieving look crept into his eyes. Slowly his fingers loosened, until his hand was no longer a fist, and he slowly lowered his upraised arm. "Dan Carver!" he gulped hoarsely.

Swede Haagem was sitting by the baize-covered table, his chair pushed back, his arms folded across his massive chest. His blue eyes were glowering. "You better calm down, by golly," he rumbled.

That seemed to release the stranger from the grip of surprise. The blankness left his face and, as though glad to have an excuse to wrench his eyes from Carver, he spun around and jabbed a bony finger at the big Scandinavian. "You ought to be run clean out of the Territory," he yelled. "You're the worst of the lot!"

"Shut up!" Haagem roared.

"Clean out of the Territory!" the man screeched.

There was a quick laugh. The red-haired man whirled again, his lank arms flapping like a scarecrow's. "Pack of fools!" he howled. "All your hard-earned money going for whiskey and crooked stud and faro. Won't you ever learn?"

The girl pushed past Carver. "All right, that's enough of that, Foster."

Foster's eyes seemed to light up. "Haah!" he screeched, jabbing a bony finger again. "You, you red-headed Jezebel! Why didn't you go back to civilization when your husband died, like a decent woman would? You had to stay here and run a saloon like a common dance-hall slut!"

"That's enough," the girl repeated.

Thin lips twisted. "You had to reopen this place—"

"I said that's enough," the girl warned, her eyes flashing dangerously.

"Taking money from decent, hard-working men—"

"Get out of here, Foster!" Lou warned. "You've said enough!"

"I won't get out!"

Lou's lips tightened and she walked determinedly toward the red-haired man. The circle parted for her. The two were face to face. "Get out of here!" she warned again. "Right now!"

"Don't like to hear the truth, do you?"

Lou Whiting's voice crackled. "Get out of here, Foster, while you can! I'll turn Swede loose on you, if you don't!"

The man sneered. "Every honest penny made in this country goes over your bar for booze. It's time somebody did something about it!"

"Are you going to get out?"

"Not until I do what I came here to do!"

The man shoved a squat, bearded trapper aside and scuttled toward the bar. He seized a bottle in his bony fingers, pulled his arm back and sent it crashing against the mirror. Glass tinkled and liquid foamed down over mahogany. Foster grabbed for another bottle.

"Swede! Throw him out of here!" Lou barked.

The big Scandinavian boomed off his chair, seized Foster by the collar, and frog-walked him to the door where he flung him far out into the snow.

A nervous laugh rose, then slowly dribbled away. Lou Whiting walked back to where Carver stood. "Now, what was it you were saying, mister? Let's have it!"

Carver seemed not to have heard her, was still gazing thoughtfully at the door. "Who was that man?"

"His name is Foster," she said irritably. "He used to be a freighter, had his own business, in fact. People began missing things, however, and he couldn't get any loads. He worked for me for about a month until I caught him stealing and fired him. Since then he has been in Gold Creek off and on, working as a trailman when he ca get the work."

"Why did he try to wreck your place?"

"Maybe because he doesn't like me—he

thinks I helped force him out of business. Or maybe because he has a queer obsession about saloons. He's tried the same thing in two or three other places, I've been told. A little bush-crazy, I guess."

"He was surprised to see me," Carver said musingly. "Just like Haagem was—"

"Let's talk about me and that fire that burned you out last night," Lou demanded.

"Later. Right now I want to talk with Foster. Where can I find him?"

"He has the third cabin past the Finn's road-house, but I want to get something settled before you go running."

"Later," Carter sadi grimly. "I have other business right now."

CARVER pushed through the door of the Golden Slipper, headed up the sled-marked street.

He opened the door of Foster's cabin and stepped inside. Foster was raising a bottle to his lips. Foster made a strangling sound, wiped his lips and glared at Carver. Carver pointed at the bottle Foster had set back down on the plank table.

"For a man who hates whiskey that was a pretty good slug you just swallowed, Foster."

Foster continued to glare. "That's my business."

"Maybe. We'll see."

"Well, shut the damn door!" Foster snarled. "It's cold enough in here as it is!"

Carver closed the door. The only light came from two narrow windows, but Carver's eyes had adjusted themselves to the dimness. The place was dirty, untidy.

"Just what were you trying to do over at the Golden Slipper, Foster?" Carver said.

"You were there, weren't you?"

"Yes, I was there. I just saw you take a good slug of whiskey, too. That's why I'm asking."

Foster's eyes measured him. "Mister, already I'm getting tired of looking at your face and listening to your talk. Either tell me what you came here for, or get out!"

"You can start by telling me where you were last night."

Foster's eyes moved nervously. He licked thin lips with the tip of his tongue.

"Well, I was right here in Gold Creek," he said grudgingly. "I've been here the last couple of weeks, in fact. My dogs have been sick. Too much cooked meat and rice—"

"Never mind that. Where were you last night?"

"Why, right here in Gold Creek, like I told you. I rolled into the bunk early."

"Nobody saw you, then, is that what you mean?"

Foster nodded. "I guess that's about right."

Carver left abruptly and headed for Lou Whiting's trading post. He stopped in the shadows and let his eyes play over the two-story log structure. There appeared to be no light inside. He waded through the snow to the beaten-down path that led to the rear door.

He shook it but got no response. Carver knew that Baird usually slept inside, but he was probably over at the Golden Slipper now. Carver raised a leg and drove his heel hard against the door. He had to do that twice more before the wooden pin snapped and the door sagged open.

Carver stepped inside. He could hear the sheet-iron stove hissing and crackling, but that was all. The interior was laid out like his post had been. He moved up cautiously to the counter, peered over it. The bunk was neatly made up.

Carver turned his attention to the ladder that gave access to the loft. He climbed it slowly, hand over hand. It was made of two spruce uprights with sawed lengths of saplings lashed into notches for rungs. He reached after he had climbed four rungs, pushed against a heavy slab trapdoor. It moved upward easily and folded over on rawhide hinges. He climbed up into the loft, dropped the trapdoor behind him, and lighted the candle.

BALED fur was piled high in rows with narrow aisles between. The odor of fleshed pelts and fat was powerful. Frost clung thickly to the log walls and hung in streamers from the ceiling. Carver began to move down the aisles of fur, holding the candle high and peering, using his fingers to probe at the bales and turn over the stiff edge of a pelt here and there.

"Looking for something, Carver?" a voice said.

Carver whirled. The candle flame almost went out. As the flame steadied he could see Lou Whiting in the aisle behind him,

a man's mackinaw on over her dress, her hands jammed deep in the pockets. A cold smile curved her red lips. Her green eyes mocked him.

"I thought you would be along so I decided to come up and wait," she said coolly. "Looking for your fur?"

Carver studied her face in the candlelight. "That's right. I'm looking for my fur."

"Well, go right ahead. Don't let me stop you!"

"I know it is in Gold Creek somewhere."

"Maybe it's right in front of your eyes. Why don't you look?"

The candlelight was steady as a rock as Carver probed the green eyes. He could see laughter there, the taunting, mocking kind of laughter. He turned around and doggedly resumed his search. The girl followed him, and he could feel her cool amusement simmering.

"I suppose you'll know your fur when you find it?" she asked finally.

"A man gets to know his fur if he's thorough. I have all of Jules D'Ormay's marten, and anyone can tell a skin pelted by him. There is some beaver with dark bands and others I'd know."

The girl made no reply and Carver went on with his search. When he had finished, the girl said: "There's a row along the back wall. I think you missed that."

"My fur isn't here," Carver said flatly.

"Oh? Are you sure?"

"I knew that as soon as you told me to go ahead and look."

"It might have been a trick."

"It might have been, but it wasn't."

The girl twitched golden eyebrows. "Well, I might have it cached somewhere. Have you thought of that?"

Carver gave her a grim look. "It's cached somewhere, all right, but I don't think you know anything about it."

"Well, this *is* a sudden change, isn't it?"

"Not so sudden, no."

"What are you trying to do then? Why did you break into my loft?"

"I have an idea. Checking here was the first part of it, just to be sure I was on the right track. I'll see you and tell you about it later if it turns out the way I think it's going to."

Carver strode abruptly down the aisle to the trapdoor, flipped it back and went down the ladder. Seconds later the girl joined him on the puncheon floor behind the trading counter.

"You're leaving now?" she asked.

"Yes."

"When will I see you again? I want to know how this idea of yours works out."

Carver hesitated. "Tomorrow, perhaps."

"All right, I'll be expecting you." She took a quick step, her arms shot up and wound around Carver's neck. She kissed him with soft, warm, parted lips, clinging to him for long seconds. Then she released him and stepped back, her eyes shining oddly. "That's just in case you discover I had nothing to do with stealing your fur," she said.

Carver's pulses were pounding a little in spite of himself. "What do you mean?"

"Come back and find out after you have found your fur!" the girl challenged.

CARVER knew there were a couple of unoccupied cabins, crumbling and in disrepair, that had escaped the foragers of firewood. They were on the far side of a stretch of willow and muskeg about half a mile west of the town. He returned to the Finn's, put on his snowshoes and headed in that direction. As he approached the deserted cabins he circled the willows.

The Colt Peacemaker sagged in the pocket of his mackinaw. He pulled it out and approached the nearest cabin from the rear. He reached the rear wall and kicked off his snowshoes. The moon was up now, and, reflecting from the snow, bathed everything in a pale blue light. Hugging the wall, he slipped around a corner. He kept his back to the wall, edged toward the front. He reached a window. It had been newly boarded up.

He edged around to the front. He kicked on the door, whirled and stood with his back to the wall, gun in hand. Nothing happened. He used the stiff rawhide latchstring, unlatched the door and kicked it open. It swung inward and revealed nothing but a yawning darkness.

He fumbled in a pocket for the candle and lighted it. The flame revealed a cold, stark interior, bare except for the pole framework of three bunks . . . and two long freight sleds piled high with lashed-down fur!

Carver moved over to the sleds. It was

his fur, no doubt about it. Carver stepped back, stared at it thoughtfully for a few moments, then pinched out the candle and dropped it in his pocket. He went back outside, closed the door and latched it again. He walked around to the rear of the cabin and hid his snowshoes in the feathery depths of a fat young balsam.

He leaned a broken spruce stub against the log wall, used it to gain access to the slanted roof. He crawled forward in the snow until he could look over the front edge, where the pitch of the roof was the highest and where he could command all the approaches to the cabin.

He was lying on his belly, his head low. He looked the .45 over again, then scraped some snow away and laid the gun between his arms in front of him.

High overhead the moon shed its pale, ghostly light, shimmering on the snow, making deep pools of shadows around the clumps of spruce. The still cold persistently felt for Carver's flesh, causing him to move his arms and wiggle his shoulders to fight it off.

It was almost an hour before anything happened. Carver heard a branch swish somewhere, a man cursed. Three men, a long freight sled and a double string of dogs came in sight between two clumps of spruce. They headed directly for the cabin.

It was working out as Carver had planned. His appearance in Gold Creek had forced their hand. They had to move fast now, get the fur out of the settlement, maybe run it over into Alaska and try to dispose of it there. They were walking into his trap.

Carver let his right hand cover the butt of the Colt. As the men drew nearer, he recognized Haagem, Baird and Foster. The three he had expected. They didn't notice the wavering trail leading up to the rear of the cabin from the willows, but came directly to the entrance and swung the unwieldy dog string around, Foster cursing the dogs and making his rawhide whip crackle.

The dogs yelped and snarled and milled in a tight circle as the wheeler, a big Mackenzie Husky, pivoted them expertly. Foster got the string straightened out and began to work on the traces. Haagem and Baird went into the cabin and began to carry out the bales of fur and load them on the sled.

Foster cut the string in half and, with the aid of Haagem, dragged the two half-empty sleds out from inside the cabin. The red-haired man then further split the dogs, hitching them in shorter double strings to each sled. That gave them three sleds about two-thirds loaded, the larger of the three carrying trail gear in the front part of the basket under a lashed tarp.

Carver cocked the single-action gun, the hammer making a sharp crackle in the cold air. Haagem stared up, but saw nothing.

"Let's get going," twanged Foster.

He had the whip raised, ready to snap, when Lou Whiting suddenly appeared from out of the spruces about twenty-five yards distant. Her face was rimmed with the fur fringe of her parka hood, and a lever-action Winchester was leveled in her mittened hands.

Only Baird seemed to grasp the situation instantly. He darted to the lead sled and pulled out a carbine. He worked the lever, jacking a cartridge into the chamber.

Lou snapped a shot but missed. Baird triggered, and the girl went down in the snow. Carver raised the .45, squeezed the trigger. The big gun bucked in his hand, and, with the roar, Baird was bowled over backward as thought caught by the sweep of a falling tree.

The dogs had begun barking with the first shot. As Baird fell, he rolled backward into the lead dogs of the second string. The dogs shied and instantly the string was a tangled mass of fur and harness, snarls and slashing fangs.

CARVER vaulted off the roof, landed on all fours in the snow. With a high-pitched screech, Foster ran at him, the dog whip raised high. Carver let him close, then used the barrel of the Colt, bringing it down with a sweeping motion. It crunched across the bridge of Foster's nose.

Foster screamed like a woman, staggered back, pawing at his face. Carver swung again, raking the gun-barrel down on Foster's parka. He could feel the impact of bone and metal, and Foster dropped as though brained by an ax.

Carver turned to Haagem. The big Scandinavian had grabbed up the rifle

dropped by Baird. Carver ducked, firing as he hit the snow. He rolled, fired again. He heard the bullet whine viciously and saw the gun spin out of Haagem's big hands. It was a lucky shot, but the rifle barrel deflecting the bullet had saved Haagem's life.

The big man roared and flung himself forward. Carver rose on one knee and tried to club his gun, as he had with Foster, but Haagem hit him like an avalanche, bowling him over in the snow and sending the gun spinning away. Haagem brought a knee up under Carver's chin as he tried to rise. The blow spread-eagled Carver in the powdery snow.

Haagem rushed at him murderously. He leaped high, his knees drawn up, his feet shooting out like a striking hawk's, in the manner of fighting used by timber men. Carver rolled dseperately and grabbed at the lashing feet. If they hit their mark just once the fight would be over. His grab missed, but the roll saved him. Haagem roared back to the attack. This time Carver caught one of the thrusting feet, twisted savagely.

Haagem bellowed again, this time in pain. He seemed to pirouette in the air and came down hard in the snow. Carver scrambled to his feet. Haagem arose, they came together and they were toe to toe, slugging and mauling. Carver felt the blows numbing, driving him back. Haagem paused long enough to fling off his mittens and let them dangle by the mitten cord strung through the sleeves of his mackinaw. Carver took advantage of the lull to do the same. They closed again, two big men fighting a primitive battle in a cold, frozen waste.

Haagem grunted curses. Carver fought grimly. He opened a cut under Haagem's eye, brought blood and felt a knuckle split at the same time. Haagem came in, pumped savage blows in Carver's ribs and chest; numbing blows that stung through the parka and shortened Carver's breath and jolted him down to his toes.

Carver used chopping, overhand punches. Haagem bowed his head and the punches caromed off his hard skull like peas bouncing off a rock. Carver began to hook, his fists raking at the sides of Haagem's face and head. This brought Haagem's head up. Carver shot over a right that rocked Haagem back on his heels and sent him floundering back with his arms dangling. Before he could get his arms up, Carver had darted forward and pumped in three more short, savage blows.

Haagem roared, gave more ground, then landed a looping fist that brought Carver up short. He felt Haagem swing over to the attack, driving him back, raining punches against his face and chest. A red-hot jab of pain lanced at him as a broad, blunt thumb scooped at his eye. He twisted his head, dropped into a protective crouch.

Haagem tried to bull right over him. Carver lunged to meet the rush, launching his body across Haagem's thick thighs. The yellow-haired man was stopped, spun half way around. Carver straightened, his fists flying. His right caught Haagem flush on the point of the jaw.

Carver could see the big man sag. His eyes glazed. But he caught himself and staggered forward, his huge arms spread wide in an embrace as he sought to catch and crush his foe. Carver danced back. Haagem stumbled. Carver darted in, landing another hard punch on Haagem's jaw.

Haagem was severely rocked. He floundered back, caught himself again and again lunged forward, arms stiffly spread, trying that last resort of the primitive fighter—catch the foeman in his hands, crush him, kill him. Carver reached out, slid his hand down along the outside of one of Haagem's spread arms. He crooked his elbow, surged forward, throwing his weight against the big Scandinavian. Haagem was spun about. Carver let him stagger, following him closely.

As Haagem checked himself, Carver took careful aim. He brought the punch up from his knees. Pain bathed his fist as it landed and he felt two more knuckles split open. He felt the shock of the blow travel up his arm and tingle down the corded muscles of his back. Haagem tottered, his eyes rolled back until only the whites showed. His knees caved and he fell forward in the snow.

CARVER sucked the freezing air deeply into his lungs. He stood over the fallen man a few moments, but Haagem didn't stir. He turned away from him, floundered through the snow to where the girl lay. Her eyes were open, her lips

white and her face taut. Carver could see blood soaking through one sleeve of her parka.

Lou Whiting's lips moved in a wan smile. "Hello, Carver," she whispered. Her fingers wound around his hand tightly. "That was a grand fight!"

"You're hurt?" Carver asked anxiously.

"No . . . just my arm. It has stopped bleeding."

Carver probed with gentle fingers. Although she winced, there were no broken bones. She was suffering from shock more than anything else. Carver carried her over to one of the sleds, moved the fur around to make a place for her, then covered her with the rabbit skin blanket he found in the lead sled.

Lou explained her presence. "As soon as I heard your story I suspected Swede and Baird and maybe Foster, but I wanted to be sure. I kept an eye on Swede and followed him tonight. I guess I should have told you what I had in mind, but I'm too stubborn. I almost made a mess of things. Will you forgive me, Dan Carver?"

Carver tucked the rabbit skin blanket in around the edges. "Maybe I'm the stubborn one," he said. "I was almost sure Foster was the red-haired person I had seen at the fire, but I kept it to myself. I needled him to force his hand, and Haagem and Baird were jittery too. All I had to do was find where they had cached the fur and wait for them to come to me."

The girl smiled. "So my red hair almost got me into trouble with you, didn't it?"

Carver's face felt hot. "As I just tried to explain to you, when I saw Foster in the Golden Slipper, I revised my ideas. Foster came there to vent a little spite on you and in a clumsy attempt to make people believe that no friendship lay between him and Swede, just in case anybody became suspicious about the fire at my post . . . but as soon as I saw him I knew he was the one I had seen at the fire."

The girl's smile became a grin. "That's all right, Dan. I forgive you!"

Again Carver's face felt warm. He put Baird on the lead sled. The little man had been hit in the shoulder, low, but would survive. Haagem was sitting up. Foster was groaning a little. Carver had picked up the girl's Winchester. He would make Haagem and Foster handle two of the sleds. For the first time in twenty-four hours he felt contentment. He had his fur back. There was just one thing more bothering him and it came suddenly into sharp focus. Lou was calling him. He walked over to the sled.

"Carver, I said when you had recovered your fur that you could come back to me and find out something. Are you going to do that?"

"Of course," Carver said firmly.

Her eyes searched his face. "Do you know what I'm talking about, Dan Carver?"

Carver hesitated. "I think I do. Yes."

"From the first day I saw you, I knew you were the one man who could again make me remember I am a woman. Maybe that is why I have been so mean to you at times. . . . Now do you know what I mean?"

Carver felt a new emotion grip him. "Yes, I do," he said.

"I want you to make me remember I am a woman," the girl said simply.

Carver felt the emotion become a warm tide within him. "Yes," he said hoarsely.

The girl's eyes glowed. "And you'll do that?"

"Yes, I'll do that," Carver said.

FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINES A Fiction House Magazine FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINES

The dead weight of the missionary in the sled made the going difficult.

ARCTIC MADNESS

By W. W. BRIDE

Across 300 miles of treacherous snow-ice country Constable Pedley waged courageous battle against his maniacal prisoner—the sly, wolverine-tough madman of Peace River.

ALEX RIBEAUX'S cabin on the Peace River sat on a headland that commanded a view over the white, frozen waste for miles in either way. It was one spot of pleasant warmth and cheeriness in the whole barren and desolate country.

Constable Pedley, of the R.C.M.P. peered through red-rimmed eyes at the black spot that had been his goal for the past three days.

The wandering Cree had warned him that there was something wrong at the cabin, hinting at a mysterious 'shaman' haunting the cabin. Pedley lost no time in hitting the trail from Fort Chipewtan to Ribeaux's.

As he swung the dogs in a gentle arc down the slope, breaking the sled expertly, a fur-clad figure burst from one of the sheds and stumbled towards him. Through the matted hair and heavy beard he hardly recognized the gaunt features of his voluble friend, Alex.

"Mon ami, I thank God you have come. This thing is terrible. I have sleep in the shed three nights now. I am not in the cabin. He's for kill me any time. You take him away?"

The constable stared in amazement at this

hulk of a man who was fairly blubbering in his excitement. He spoke harshly,

"Straighten up, Alex. You're acting like an old woman."

"You t'ink, I scared, eh," said Alex, still clutching the constable's sleeve. "By damn, you right. That fellow he throw knife. He never sleep. He jump up and choke me in the night." The swarthy trapper ended in a whimper. The Mountie knew a case of nerves, lack of sleep and no food will do strange things to a man.

They strode to the cabin door. Constable Pedley went first, Ribeaux trotting along in abject terror. Pedley flung the door wide and stepped in the room. His quick, steel-blue eyes caught a sudden movement in the gloom of the far corner. He ducked just as Ribeaux screamed a warning. An axe buried itself in the post behind the constable. It carried the ring of death.

Pedley's flying leap caught the axe-wielder off balance and the two men crashed to the floor. The intruder fought like a maniac, biting, gouging, kicking and twisting with a strength that made Pedley exert every muscle to the breaking point. Gasping and panting, the Mountie forced the unknown assailant into an iron hammerlock and shouted for Ribeaux to bring cords.

Trussed like a bale of furs, the man lay on the floor and mouthed gutteral sounds through foam-flecked lips.

"It's a white man," cried Pedley in amazement. He stared at the white-haired fellow. The man was small but wiry. Pedley was amazed that the slight figure on the floor could have put up such a scrap. The words of Ribeaux broke in on his thoughts,

"He's come here maybe three weeks ago. He's missionaire from Nova Scotia, I think. He's crazy in the head."

Pedley had heard of a fanatic who had come into the Peace country vowing to bring Christianity to the lost tribes of the northland. Apparently, the utter loneliness, the frustration, and the barren, desolate silence of the Arctic world had been more than the man could stand.

There was only one thing to do. Get the fellow down to Fort Saskatchewan to the hospital where he could have proper treatment and care—and get him there before he could kill some one.

THE two men laid their plans as they set about getting their meal ready. From the cabin to Fort Saskatchewan lay over three hundred miles of rugged, snow-ice country.

"We'll pull out first thing in the morning." decided Pedley as he poked another mouthful of beans at the mad missionary who sat propped up in the bunk. The maniac looked at cords that held him fast with a puzzled expression. It all seemed beyond his understanding.

Ribeaux shook his head. "She's a bad weather pretty soon. I know. I live in this country long time. She's goin' blow like hell pretty quick."

Pedley shrugged. "With that team out there I could get clear to Alaska."

The madman, whose name they learned was Harris offered little resistance to being dressed and bundled into the sled. With a crack of his lash and a cheery wave to Ribeaux, Pedley headed down the Peace. He planned following the river most of the way to Athabasca and on south to the Fort.

For the first twenty miles, the swish of his snow-shoes, the squeak of the sled runners, and the panting of the dogs were the only sounds in that vast void of silence and snow. Then a faint shout from the sled called Pedley back from his task of breaking trail. Harris looked at him from clear grey eyes from which all trace of madness was gone.

"It's very cold here, officer. Maybe if I could run behind the sled for a while I'd get the circulation back in my legs."

The voice was gentle and well modulated. The request was sound, the reasoning clear. It would be an inhuman thing to allow the fellow to lie there and slowly freeze to death in this sub-zero weather. Even a set of iron handcuffs would wear the flesh to the bone in a matter of hours. Pedley helped the missionary out of the sled.

The first few hours sped swiftly along. The team licked up the miles as Dale, the lead dog, plowed along with the spirit of a young pup. As the equipment swung along the crest of a hummock and ploughed down the side, Mostuk, a new dog in the team, nipped the heels of his running mate. At once there was a flurry of snow and the team dissolved into fighting, tearing balls

of fur. Cursing Mostuk and wielding his lash, Pedley waded in. The tangle of traces was worse than a fouled fish-line.

As Pedley stooped to untangle the mess something struck him a terrific blow at the base of the skull. Grasping fingers sought his throat. Harris was reaching for the service revolver strapped in Pedley's holster.

Hampered by the thick clothing, Pedley strove to break the merciless grip of the steel claws that were slowly shutting off his wind. With a terrific wrench he broke partly free. Harris brought up his knee and dealt a pain-searing blow in the groin. In the fraction of a second that Pedley doubled, blacked with pain, Harris made a grab for the gun. His numbed fingers drew it partly out but he failed to grip it. Red murder glared from the deep pools that were the mad man's eyes. Pedley rolled free, staggered to his feet and swung. His mittened fist crashed against the man's jaw with a jolt that knocked Harris sprawling in the snow. Harris struggled to rise but Pedley threw his six-foot bulk on him and snapped the handcuffs. The man lay panting in the snow while the dogs sat and wondered at the strange antics of the masters.

THE remainder of the trip became a nightmare for Pedley. No more chances could be taken with the maniac. Every instant of the day and night, the Mountie must guard his rifle, his revolver, his axe and every other part of the equipment that could be used as a weapon. Wrapped in a sleeping bag, covered with a robe and lashed to the sled, Harris was helpless. But in that very helplessness lay his greatest weapon. During the endless hours of tedious hell that Pedley endured, Harris played the part of a helpless infant. Yet his keen eyes watched for the slightest slip on the part of his captor that would allow him to make a break. The first day after the battle was uneventful. That night, Harris made the frigid air ring with hymns—then his babblings and threats as to what he would do the Mountie. Sleep was impossible. Pedley hit the trail extra early that morning.

During the succeeding days Harris became increasingly difficult. He refused to eat and threw the food in the snow. With patience that he did not believe he possessed, the brawny Pedley wheedled and coaxed and forced the food into the man.

THE dead weight of the missionary in the sled made the going difficult for the dogs. Pedley realized that he must conserve the strength of the animals for the grueling test that faced them. The next time that Harris complained of the cold, the Mountie devised a system of handcuffing the man to the sled in such a manner that he would suffer the minimum of discomfort. The dogs picked up and the patrol sped on its way.

The sixth day of the journey they reached the banks of the Athabasca. Harris seemed to be in a better frame of mind. Pedley halted in a grove beside the river. The weather was a good deal milder, there were parts of the river that were open water, showing dark patches in the white expanse of the stream.

The usual procedure when making camp was that Harris was securely handcuffed to the sled. Then Pedley cut wood for the small fire to boil the tea and heat the scanty meal. The preacher surprised the constable by asking,

"It doesn't seem right that you should have to do all of the work of making camp. Let me gather some of the wood by the trees there. You get the stuff from the sled."

For a fraction of a second Pedley hesitated. Then the pleasure of having a sane man to talk to, of having a companion helping make the camp, overcame his better judgment. With a shrug he released the handcuffs. But he didn't turn his back on the man. He pointed to the wood and reached with one hand into the sled for the pan. The other hovered near his holster. Harris rubbed his wrist and smiled benignly.

He walked a few paces to the wood as Pedley watched. Then he suddenly whirled and dashed past the amazed officer, straight for the river. With sickening realization of the madman's intention Pedley bellowed and started after him. The light figure of Harris seemed to skim over the snow. Down the edge of the bank he plunged and kept right out across the ice. Near the center of the stream where the deep, fast water gurgled dully, a dull blue

spot glistened. Open water. Exerting every ounce of speed, Pedley raced to catch the demented man before he plunged in. His fingers were already outstretched to grasp the collar of the flying parka when Harris slipped out of sight in the icy depths. Pedley plunged after him. The sting of the icy water was like a blow to the solar plexus. In the black, roaring waters Pedley groped for the missionary. He felt the soft cloth of the parka and tugged with all his great strength, fighting his way to the surface before they would be swept under thhe ice. Frantically he kicked and thrashed his way to the light above him. Harris was an inert mass that caught and hung on the jagged edges of the icehole.

His breath coming in agonizing gasps, Pedley lay on the ice of the river for a minute to regain his strength. Beside him, the body of Harris lay, a limp mass. When Pedley rose to his feet his clothes crackled with a queer stiffness. Frozen. He heaved the mad preacher on his shoulder and set out for the camp.

With numbed fingers he threw more wood on the fire, stripped the clothes off the unconscious form, did the same for himself, and set to work rubbing Harris briskly. He had heard of the cold pack treatment for mental cases and grinned sourly at the thought of the old fellow curing himself.

Finally wrapped in the sleeping bag, the preacher dropped into a deep sleep. Pedley sat looking at him. Usually the man seemed quite sane after one of his spells. Pedley felt he was just about at the end of his tether. Sleep in fits and starts, constantly on his guard, worry over the speed they were making, the lack of any other human contact, had all taken their toll. He rolled into his blankets, his rifle beside him, determined to watch Harris more closely.

But Nature overtook Pedley. The exhausted Mountie fell into a sleep that amounted to a stupor. He awoke with the realization that somebody was strangling him. The steel talons closed around his throat like searing bands. Weakened, tired, hampered by his blanket and sleeping bag, he felt his senses swirl. He suddenly went limp, holding the little breath left in his body until his head rang. The weight on his chest never moved. The hands on his throat slowly withdrew. Harris was searching furiously among the blankets for the rifle. With a snake-like movement, Pedley buckled his steel-springed body throwing the attacker to one side. On his feet in a flash, drawing deep gulps of the stinging air, Pedley lashed a right that crashed high on the crazy man's head. Two more quick jabs and Harris collapsed. Pedley almost fell beside him. He slipped the cuffs on and rolled the unconscious form into the sleeping bag. All the rest of the night the policeman sat beside the fire, watching the cunning maniac who slept as peacefully as a child.

Constable Pedley realized that speed was essential if he were to make Fort Saskatchewan alive. His nerves almost at the breaking point, with queer, odd noises in his head, he drove the dogs at breakneck speed. The camps became further and further apart. Often as darkness drifted in, he played a game with himself just to see how many more lagging steps he could take before he would have to stop. Choosing camp sites by this means often meant cold, slim suppers. He laughed queerly as he thought of making camp. Harris was the only one who made any use of the bed.

Two weeks of this nightmarish, hellish trip and there still remained a little less than one hundred miles to go. Pedley grimly pushed on. That night the men sat in a small spruce thicket staring moodily into the flames of a small fire. Pedley's head came up with a jerk. The long drawn howl of the wolf pack. Before they turned in that night, the shadowy gray shapes of the timber wolves darted across open patches of snow around the fire. All night they howled and paced, approached and fled. Harris was terrified.

THE wolves did not attack that night. But all through the following day the men were dogged by the pack. They were killers, every one, driven bold and fearless by the merciless pangs of hunger. Time after time Pedley peered through his swollen, red eyes at the vague shapes. He could not be sure his senses were playing tricks on him or not. As dusk drew in and the exhausted travellers were forced to stop to make camp, the eerie half-light of the snow-covered ground and the frosted trees showed green, flashing eyes as the

pack circled silently around the men in a never-ending circle. The dogs shifted restlessly and gave forth low growls, the hackles rising as they caught the scent of the wild marauders. Pedley looked across at Harris. The fellow sat there, his face drawn with fear as his restless eyes tried to follow the wolves.

With sudden decision the Mountie staggered across, reached for the man's hands and unsnapped the handcuffs. Harris did not to seem to notice. Pedley thought, "We may both be dead by morning. I'll have enough to do without looking after him if those brutes take it into their heads to attack."

He busied himself with the fire, turning his back on the wolves. The soft rush of feet, the howls of the dogs brought him around quickly. Several of the more ravenous brutes had made a rush for the dogs. Pedley's rifle dropped two of the beasts. The rest fled at the first crack of the rifle. But they returned.

The strength of lifting the rifle and taking a shot into the darkness was telling on Pedley. About a dozen of the beasts had fallen before darkness was well set in.

The rush came with a speed and silence that was terrifying. From every side the lean beasts streaked in. Pedley fired until they were too close. Then he swung his rifle like a club. One of the brutes leaped and seized his right forearm, dragging Pedley to his knees. Burying his throat in the thick parka Pedley fought the brute with all his fast-waning strength. Suddenly it released its hold and fell back. Rolling the carcass to one side, Pedley struggeld to his feet.

The gleam of battle in his eyes, his white hair glinting in the moon light, Harris stood like some knight of old wielding a gleaming axe with deadly effect. Every swing meant a split skull, every stroke a dead wolf. Pedley recovered his rifle and completed the slaughter. The pack, or what was left of it, scattered as silently and as suddenly as it had come—with the screaming Harris in hot pursuit!

Pedley shouted and took a few wavering steps after the running man. His relief at seeing the little missionary trot back into the camp was almost as great as his relief at driving off the wolves.

"Let me look at your wounds." Harris' words were spoken quietly and earnestly. Pedley obediently stripped off his torn and blood-soaked hood and bared his right arm. The missionary tore strips of cloth and bound up the jagged wounds that bled profusely. Pedley felt light-headed. He watched Harris bustle around the camp to get the meal ready. He watched him as he tucked the Mountie into the sleeping bag and turned back to the fire.

THE next morning the men were able to see the havoc the wolves had made. There was not a single dog that had not been chewed. Pedley shot two on the spot. He was forced to hold the weapon in his left hand for the right hung useless in a sling. The searing pain told him that infection was already starting.

Dumping much of their supplies, the men hit the trail with the limping dogs. Their only hope lay in a quick dash to the Fort. By noon Pedley was finished. He collapsed on the sled. Harris rolled him in, tucked the furs around him and seizing a strap of the traces, urged the dogs on.

The following day two Mounties on patrol, a dozen miles from the Fort, watched a queer outfit moving slowly along the river bank. One man tottered in the traces behind the lead dog. One animal limped painfully behind him. On the sled, lashed down with rawhide, lay a second man. He babbled and shouted in delirium. It was Pedley.

The patrol lost no time in getting the men to the Fort. Pedley was rushed to the hospital. Harris, who seemed to drop back into his sullen vicious mood as soon as his task was finished, was rushed to the Brandon Asylum. Within six months he was sent home, cured. Constable Pedley was longer recovering from the effects of his ordeal. He was granted an extended holiday and it was a year before he was able to resume his duties.

This nightmare trip began on December 17, 1904 and ended on January 6, 1905. Over three hundred miles of the wilderness of northern Alberta had been covered by the two men. The records, the log of the trip kept by Pedley up until the attack by the wolves, rests among the dusty, dull reports of the R.C.M.P. in Ottawa.

Letter from a Sourdough

JUST a line from an old "Alaska Klondike Sourdough." I like your magazine, enjoyed all of the last issue. May I tell you something of myself?

I left Great Falls, Montana, in 1896 when only 17 years of age. I proceeded to Seattle, Wash. Then embarked at pier B on the Steamship City of Topeka. First-class fare then to Juneau, Alaska, was only $15. On this voyage only 15 or 20 passengers were on board, all bound for Juneau, Douglas Island, and other points immediately in Southeastern Alaska. At this period, 1896, the towns of Petersburg and Skagway, did not exist, nor the White Pass Route to the Golden Klondike. Ketchikan and Wrangell, Alaska, was mostly Indian residents. I played my fiddle for the ship's passengers and they danced each evening. We were four days on the voyage before reaching Juneau.

I arrived in Juneau August 7th, 1896, at about 10 P.M. and it seemed all the residents in town were at the wharf to greet the ship's arrival. I went ashore and wound up at the Louvre Theatre, combination dance hall, gambling house and drinking bar. A free and early variety show was in progress. Mat Endlemau was the manager; Eddie Lord, Bill Thompson and Charlie Cobb were the bartenders, Roy Pinkham was the stage manager; Bob Fairbanks was the dance hall caller-off, and "Big" Tom Wilson run all the gambling games in the house. Even as early as that year, 1896, Charlie Howard, a white man, operated a Chinese Lottery Game in this house, the first and only in the territory of Alaska. This night—any night in Juneau, Alaska, and this house was full of sound and smell of the frontier boom town; the odor of unkempt men, of half-drunken white women and young Indian girls who worked on percentage in the dance halls.

The raucous voices, the fumes of rot-gut whiskey and the gold fevered eyes that mark the boom-towners from the Yukon to Nevada and Colorado. By day the hills near Juneau and on Douglas Island, echoed with the chatter of drills, stampmills and blasting. But at night the hills seemed hushed. At night, the miner, the musker and fisherman came to town to spend their earnings for the Toys offered by the gambling, drinking and dance hall girls. It was bad women, bad whiskey and crooked games. And Sun-down was dawn for the tinhorns, pimps and boosters. The women lived like wolverines at the edge of a mushroom civilization.

So it was said of Juneau in 1896, it's day all day in the daytime, and there ain't no night at all! The Louvre Theatre gambling games were jammed with human flotsam and jetsam when I entered there in '96, just a boy of seventeen. This herd of men and women ebbed in the bright lights; a hundred were jammed in a semi-circle around the faro bank table in the rear of the place, and a hundred pair of eyes glinted under the harsh lights. This was all new to me. Those close enough to see the table stood rigid. Only their eyes moved, sliding under narrowed lids from player to player. Those behind, those who couldn't see, waited for the whisper of those in front to tell the developments at the game. The bartenders stood silent and motionless and wooden faced behind the long, polished bar.

It shall never be forgotten by me; it was a new world to me, a rough, tough and dirty underworld in the raw; loose women, pimps, dopes, hopheads and crooked gamblers.

In April, 1897, Jim McKay, an old pioneer sourdough of the Yukon country, arrived in Juneau from the Klondike via the Chilkoot Pass. He entered the Louvre Theatre barroom and asked the house crowded with people to line up and have a drink on him.

He then said: "I have just arrived from the Klondike country. George Carmack and his squaw Kate have made a rich gold strike on Rabbit Creek (later named Bonanza Creek) in the Klondike, and I think it will be a boom gold camp, and you people here should get in there as soon as you can!" Everybody got the

gold fever at once. Excitement ruled and reigned in the Lourve Theatre that night.

On April 10 about 75 people, including the writer, left Juneau on a little local steamship called the Sea Lion, *owned and operated by old George Harkrader, an Alaska pioneer. We arrived at Dyea, Alaska, on the Chilkoot pass trail at 5 A.M., April 11th, 1897, with three feet of snow on the level.*

"Old" Bob Wright met our ship with a big scow. We long-shored our outfits from the steamship to Bob's scow. Then, with sweeps pushed the scow to shore. There was no docks, only a small Indian Village and Healy and Wilson's Trading Post Store. Jack Cassidy and Sam Heron were in charge of the store. "Old" Bob Wright had at that time a small saloon in Dyea, selling whiskey, beer, wine and tobacco. My sister and I put up our tent about one mile north of the beach and cooked our first meal; bacon, flapjacks, prunes and coffee that night. We slept soundly on spruce boughs; only the croak of a raven was heard. It was a long, hard mush pulling our 1,500 pound outfit by hand on Yukon sleds. Finally, we reached Shelp Camp where we camped about ten days to relay our outfit to the top of the Chilkoot Summit, 1,250 feet in height, all on my back, piece by piece, 1,500 pounds. Here I became snow blind and remained in our tent for 10 days. I bathed my eyes in salt water and tea leaves. Those were the hard, rough, tough days on our way to the Golden Klondike.

Miss Freda Maloof, a hula hula dancer was on the trail too, trying to reach the Golden Klondike. Billie Thomas, a bartender, was helping Freda over the pass. The pioneers asked Freda to dance the hula hula for them. "Archie Burns" at that time had a large log house at Shelp Camp. So we all gathered in this house. I played the fiddle and Freda danced her hula hula. Billie Thomas took up a collection in a pan which netted Freda $60. Freda was the first actress to perform on the Chilkoot pass.

At night I could see the moonbeams tinging the tops of the great hills for there was lots of snow. The dark world was being lighted with moonglory streaming down upon our little pioneer camp, and when it rose above Chilkoot Summit it shone with solitary grandeur. A stupendous topaz resting like a jewel on the crest of the fabulous peak. With this beauty there was music, a dim, sweet melody —a sighing anthem of the pines. I love beauty, and found Alaska all the sweeter for that love!

A thought came to me: Isn't the moonlight a tonic for the soul? The pettiness, the meanness, the vanity, the lust and greed are all washed away, if we but bathe in the luminous tides of the moon's glory!

Finally we reached beautiful Lake Bennett where I felled trees and whip-sawed lumber to build my row boat. When the ice broke up, May 14th, 1897, we crossed the lakes, shot the Miles Canyon, Squaw and White Horse Rapids, and down the mighty Yukon River 400 miles to Dawson City on the Golden Klondike. My sister and I got there June 3rd, 1897. I had just reached my 18th birthday. My sister was 29. We all landed on the muddy beach at Dawson. They were great, strong, bold men and women—great pioneers!

There were some who had lost fortunes and hoped to regain them; some who never possessed means, and therefore were full of ardor; and a few whom the tide of life had cast upon the mighty Yukon River, and for whom the future had neither hopes nor fears. .. ..

Let us hope that the Rulers of the future will not, in the pride of the present, forget the great Alaska pioneer Sourdoughs of the past.

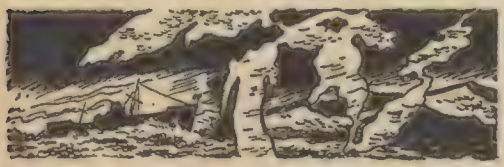
When I mush the last mile;
Let me still hold a smile,
For Alaska and friends most dear.
Let me lie there and dream;
Beside the Yukon's stream;
In the land of the last frontier.

James R. Little,
1333 S. W. Main Street,
Portland 5, Oregon.

the BIG STORM!

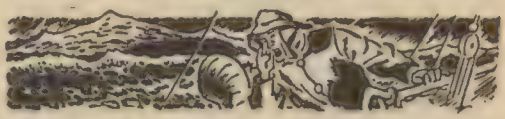
WALTER GAELI

AS LONG AS DOUGHTY SKIPPERS AND BRAVE CREWS PUT CARGO AND SCHEDULE ABOVE THEIR OWN SAFETY--COME WHAT MAY--SO SHALL EPIC TALES SUCH AS THE LAST, TRAGIC TRIP OF THE **ARGUS** CONTINUE TO ADD TO THE ANNALS OF MEN AGAINST THE SEA!



THE BIG STORM THAT SWEPT THE WATERS OF THE GREAT LAKES FROM SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 8, TO TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 11, 1913, WILL NEVER BE FORGOTTEN!! IT WAS CERTAINLY ONE OF THE MOST DISASTROUS ON RECORD... MANY SHIPS WERE LOST--BUT ONLY **THIRTEEN** SINKINGS WERE EVER VERIFIED! STRANGELY ENOUGH, THAT FATEFUL NOVEMBER 8th BEGAN MILD AND SULTRY... HOWEVER STORM WARNINGS HAD BEEN POSTED AT EVERY WEATHER BUREAU STATION ON THE GREAT LAKES AS FAR EAST AS **OSWEGO**, ON LAKE ONTARIO... AND CAPTAIN GUTCH SKIPPER OF THE **ARGUS** WAS DETERMINED TO MAKE THIS, HIS LAST TRIP OF THE SEASON, FROM BUFFALO TO SOUTH CHICAGO ON SCHEDULE... THE CARGO WAS COAL... THAT EVENING THE WIND STARTED TO BLOW... A TERRIFIC GALE BEGAN CHURNING THE INLAND SEAS, FOLLOWED BY A DELUGE OF RAIN... THE COAL-LADEN FREIGHTER **ARGUS** BRAVELY BATTLED THE ANGRY TEMPEST...

THE SURFACE OF LAKE HURON; FOR HUNDREDS OF MILES, WAS LIKE A WITCH'S CAULDRON. THEN THE RAIN CHANGED TO **SLEET**, AND SLEET TO SNOW... MEANTIME, SHIPPING OFFICIALS IN BUFFALO, CLEVELAND AND CHICAGO ANXIOUSLY AWAITED NEWS THAT WAS SLOW IN COMING... WIRELESS SERVICE WAS DISRUPTED--TELEPHONE AND TELEGRAPH WIRES WERE DOWN... ONLY FRAGMENTARY DISPATCHES MANAGED TO GET THROUGH, AND THE NEWS THEY BROUGHT WAS ALL BAD... SCORES OF SHIPS WERE LONG OVERDUE AND UNREPORTED... BUT TO GET BACK TO CAPTAIN GUTCH--IT IS BELIEVED HE COULD HAVE SAVED THE **ARGUS** HAD HE ANCHORED IN THE SHELTERED ST. CLAIR RIVER NEAR PORT HURON... BUT GREAT LAKES SKIPPERS HOLD THEIR JOBS BY DELIVERING THEIR VESSELS INTO PORT ON TIME!!!



SO THE CAPTAIN STEERED HIS SHIP INTO THE ANGRY GALE--AND WHAT PROVED TO BE HIS **LAST** TRIP FOR ALL TIME... WHEN THE TERRIBLE FURY HAD SUBSIDED, THE FIRST EVIDENCE OF THE DESTRUCTION OF THE **ARGUS** WAS DISCOVERED... FOUR OARS AND A LIFE RAFT WERE FOUND, WASHED ASHORE JUST SOUTH OF KINCARDINE, CANADA, ACROSS FROM SAGINAW BAY... LATER, MORE WRECKAGE WAS FOUND STREWN ALL ALONG THE BEACH.....

SKAGWAY'S SEAL

By LES SAVAGE, JR.

There was no back-trail of refuge for this courage-showdown. The seal pack was roarin' crazy from the smell of blood . . . and Skagway and Blackie were matching guts before the copper-haired queen of Kodiak.

Skagway spotted the first big bull and moved toward him.

SKAGWAY lifted his beer glass off the table and stared blankly at the wet ring it left on the oil cloth. Then he set it down again. He glanced over to where Blackie Karne and Martia Bennet were dancing, and the leathern skin of his face tightened till a network of seams appeared about his eyes. He looked away quickly as the music wailed to a stop. Blackie said something to the girl and headed for the bar. Martia came over to the table and sat down.

"I thought you liked George's beer," she said.

Skagway shrugged. His eyes lifted from the full glass momentarily. The soft lights caught richly in her chestnut hair. Her large blue eyes held a subdued sparkle in a faintly flushed face.

"There's a waltz on now."

"I don't even do that," he said. "All I can do is sing a halliard shanty."

She put her elbows on the table, leaning toward him. "You're always so short with me, Skagway. What is it? You won't even look at me."

He held up his hand, starting to say something. Then he looked over at Blackie Karne, his skipper on the Bureau of Fisheries boat, and let the hand drop.

"I just can't see a girl like you on a B. F. boat. It's no place for a woman."

"I missed the regular run to the Pribilofs, and I've got to reach St. Paul before

the new term, that's all. Those kids haven't got anyone else to teach them." Martia ran her finger around the wet ring his glass had left on the cloth. "Or is it that?"

"Is it what?"

"Under ordinary circumstances you wouldn't object to a woman on the *Chitinika*. You took me across last season. Are you expecting trouble this time?"

"What are you tacking towards?" he said.

"Blackie thought Tabor might show up here tonight."

That brought his head up. "He told you—?"

Whatever else he would have said was stopped by the slam of the door. Skagway twitched slightly in his chair. Then he turned to look. It was Tabor.

The big Aleut halfbreed's mukluks made a soft, sighing noise against the sawdust of the floor as he advanced toward the bar. The hood of his kotic parka was lined with dirty fox fur that framed his brown, fat, bland face. The grease on his beardless chin was so thick it looked ready to start dripping off any time.

"Blackie!" he grinned. "Look like we got *hi yu* whiskey tonight!"

Blackie had started from the bar with three fresh beers; he turned back and set them down with a loud clink. "Yeah," he said. "Plenty of whiskey tonight. How's the halibut fishing, Tabor?"

Tabor went on up to the bar in his padding walk, followed by three stolid Aleuts as bland and prodigious as himself. They ranged themselves along the rail without taking their eyes off Blackie.

"Four whiskeys, George," said Tabor. "Halibut fishing would be fine if the Bureau of Fisheries didn't keep running their survey boats back and forth across the banks all the time. What's the B. F. here for tonight?"

Blackie put one elbow on the bar and leaned his weight over against it. He drew his lower lip back against the white line of his teeth and ran a thumb across the stubble of blue-black beard covering his outthrust jaw.

"We heard you shipped aboard two dozen kenches for seals in Seward," he said.

The Aleut grinned. "Somebody's been feeding you herring bait."

"The Bureau of Fisheries doesn't get its bait from a halibut boat, Tabor," said Blackie. "We also heard you took on a thousand pounds of salt in Valdez."

MARTIA BENNET was leaning forward across the table toward Skagway, her eyes on the men at the bar. "Does he have to talk so loud?" she whispered.

"Maybe he wants them to hear," muttered Skagway.

Grinning, Tabor downed his jigger. "Might be I'm salting my halibut instead of icing them this year."

"In kenches?" Blackie's voice sounded like anchor chain scraping a rusty hawse hole.

That bland smile was still on Tabor's glistening face. "You B. F. men get to thinking you own the whole Bering. Whether I shipped a half a ton of salt or a hundred tons wouldn't make any difference to you, Blackie. I got my clearance from the Navy."

Blackie's weight shifted toward Tabor. "You don't leave Kodiak harbor till you dump those kenches, Tabor. There'll be no seal poaching!"

Martia was squeezing the edge of the table with both hands and her eyes were squinted as if in pain. "Oh, Blackie, do you have to shout?" she whispered. "That's no way to handle them."

"My boat's in the harbor, Blackie," said Tabor. "I'm shipping anchor as soon as I leave Greek George's here."

"The hell you are," yelled Blackie. "You're dumping that salt, Tabor, hear me, you're dumping that salt!"

"*Pratrioti,*" said Greek George. He stood behind the bar, wringing his hands in a dirty rag. "*Patrioti,* let's not quarrel. Let's not quarrel in Greek George's."

Tabor downed his drink and turned away. His three men moved to do the same.

"Tabor!" yelled Blackie, jumping after him to grab his shoulder. "I told you. You're not leaving!"

Martia's hand caught Skagway's arm. "Can't you do something—"

Skagway put both hands on the table and leaned forward. His face was turned toward the bar, but he had already spotted the half-empty bottle of Old Forester on the next table. It was tall and it had a long neck.

"*Patrioti,*" shouted Greek George.

Tabor did it so fast Skagway could not see exactly what kind of blow it was. He saw the Aleut whirl back toward Blackie and lunge forward. Blackie's wind left him with a sick gasp and his hands opened spasmodically off the other's fox-fur hood as he slid down the bar, trying to keep his feet. By the time he had lost his balance completely, Skagway was going for the bottle of Old Forester.

Blackie shook the floor with his falling and Tabor leaped after him with one hand dipping beneath his parka. The mukluks of the three other Aleuts made a swift, shuffling sound against the sawdust as they spread out behind Tabor. They had knives in their hands.

"If you want to fight, Blackie," said Tabor, and the rest of it was lost in the tinkling crash the bottle of Old Forester made against the table as Skagway struck downward. His whirl away from the table put him between Tabor and Blackie Karne. All four of the Aleuts stopped when they saw the broken bottle in Skagway's hand.

"Yeah," he said. "Let's fight."

THE following sea lapped at the *Chatinika's* stern like a hungry cat. The Wolmanized hull trembled faintly to the steady throb of the motors. Skagway's heavy plaid mackinaw made him topheavy, and the slight roll to his bow-legged walk only accentuated that.

"Oh, Ranzo was a tailor, Ranzo boys,
Ranzo,
Oh, Ranzo was no sailor, Ranzo . . ."

"Who was Reuben Ranzo, Skagway?"

He came to an abrupt stop at the end of the companionway. The seams in his leathery cheeks tightened up about his faded blue eyes. He let his gaze fall on Martia's face where she stood in the doorway of the wardroom.

"Some say a Dago named Lorenzo," he said uncomfortably. "But that ain't a Dago name, and whoever heard of a Dago name Lorenzo? I met an old square-rigger man once claimed it was Ronzoff and he came from Poland. I learned it when I was . . ."

"Go on," she said. "When you were what?"

Nothing."

A faint smile caught at her mouth. "Why do you always stop that way with me, Skagway, as if you felt you were talking too much?" He shrugged, turning to the gleaming monel rail. On their port quarter the twin helmet peaks of Bogoslov Island played hide-and-seek with the green swell. Mary moved to the rail beside him. "That broken bottle sort of soothed them down last night," she said finally.

"Nothing like it to put the damper on a fight. No use in all that blow anyway. Blackie had no authority to make Tabor dump those kenches."

"How long have you been playing nursemaid to Blackie?" she said.

He turned toward her involuntarily. "Nursemaid?"

"Blackie was making all the noise."

"I've seen Blackie handle worse than that," said Skagway.

"By yelling at them?"

"Why do you keep pulling on that shroud," he said irritably. "Blackie can hold his own anywhere. He wouldn't be a skipper if he couldn't."

"Is that what he tells you?" She saw the look in his eyes and laughed softly. "I'm sorry, Skagway." Then she sobered. "How about you? Don't you ever want to be skipper?"

"Maybe some men just don't have the capacity."

"I suppose you got that from Blackie too."

"What are you tacking towards?"

"How long have you been with him? Since that time he saved you from drowning, Skagway?"

He pulled away from her hand on his arm. "Big blow off Nome. I went overboard with a swell. Blackie was the one that got me. I would have been dead if he hadn't."

"But how?"

"With a gaff," he said impatiently. "How else?"

She was silent so long he looked at her. "I don't know," she said. "I had a different idea. I mean considering what's between you."

"No use diving in icewater when all you have to do is reach outboard and hook your gaff in a man's pants as he goes by."

"I suppose not," she said. "I just had a different idea."

"That ain't the point," he growled. "I been with him a long time, that's all. A lot of things happen. A woman can't understand. He's master and I'm mate, that's all."

"Is it?" There was a restrained fierceness in her voice. The line of her body was taut against the wind. "I don't think so. I think you've been under his domination so long you've lost something. He talks a good boat and you're ten times the sailor he is. I know, Skagway. I've taken enough runs from Kodiak to St. Paul with you. You could be a master if you wanted to. If you quit listening to him and—"

"I got to check the Fairbanks-Morse," he said, turning away. "The fresh water tasted salty this morning."

"Skagway—" she caught his arm—"Skagway, why does it always have to reach this, with us?"

"You brought it up."

"Not just this. Everything. You're always trying to get away from me."

"Look—" he met her eyes—"I'm just an old sailor—"

"Thirty-five?" She started to laugh. But she was still looking into his eyes. She didn't laugh. Her lower lip grew soft as she stared at him. "Thirty-five isn't old, Skagway."

"I didn't mean that." He moved his head from side to side, not looking at her now.

"Blackie?" she said.

"No!"

"Yes!" Her head raised sharply. "Yes." Her head dropped again, and her weight settled back on her heels. She let out a slow breath. "Even for a woman, then. I didn't think it went that far, Skagway."

"What do you mean?"

"Between you and Blackie," she said. "Even a woman."

"What about him and me?" said Blackie Karne. Skagway had not heard the *Chatinika's* skipper come down the companionway. He stood there grinning, his lower lip pulled in flat against his teeth, rubbing a thumb across the stuble on his outthrust jaw. He dropped his hand and laughed. "You aren't trying to cut in on me are you, Skagway?"

"Is it funny?" said Skagway.

Blackie threw back his head and roared. "Funny?" Still laughing, he jerked his thumb at Skagway and looked at Martia. "An old sea-dog like him with bow legs and a walrus head for a face . . ."

KARNE trailed off abruptly. Martia had not answered his laugh. The breeze whipped her thin wool skirt against the curve of her leg. She had been looking at Skagway and her eyes were big and dark. Karne glanced from the sober girl to his mate. His mouth relaxed from the laughter.

"Wait a minute," he said.

"I gotta go check the fresh water system," said Skagway.

"I told you to wait a minute!" Blackie grabbed his arm as he tried to turn away. Karne stood there, holding Skagway by the coatsleeve. He looked at Martia again. "Maybe it's not as funny as I thought. What's going on between you? You're not really trying to cut me out, are you, Skagway?"

"What do you think?"

"Don't talk to me that way," growled Karne. He grasped Skagway's lapel and jerked him around square. "Answer me. What kind of course are you charting with this girl?"

"Don't do that, Blackie. We been together a long time—"

"That's right. We've been together a long time." Blackie yanked Skagway in by the lapel until their faces were almost touching. Skagway could smell the oil and sweat of Blackie's body. "We been together a long time and when I picked you up you weren't nothing but a puking dying little wharf-rat living on herring chum the canneries wouldn't even feed the fish. If I hadn't come along and given you a berth on the best B. F. boat in the Bering you'd have been chum for the fish yourself right now!"

"Blackie—"

"No!" Blackie whirled him around and slammed him back against the ward room so hard the whole structure shuddered. "Just because you can hang onto the wheel you think you can be a skipper? You saw what was between me and Martia. You've known all along. What right have you to do this? A stinking chumming little wharf-rat like you. What right?"

Rigid against the wall of the wardroom, Skagway could see Martia's face over

Blackie's shoulder. She had been up on her toes, staring at him. But as Blackie held him there, shouting in his face, she dropped back, slowly. Her eyes narrowed and her mouth twisted in some expression and then thinned. She put her hands on the monel rail and leaned back, watching woodenly now.

"I ought to dump you off right now," said Blackie. "I ought to—"

His mouth was still shouting the words but Skagway could not hear them. The other noise drowned it out. It was a wild, screaming sound. The boat rocked and shuddered.

The steady throb of the deisels turned into a clanging crashing roar. Then that stopped and there was a muted screech dying below decks and the boat wallowed in a soundless sea.

In the abrupt, awesome silence, Blackie let go Skagway and whirled toward the end of the wardroom. The clang of someone scrambling up the ladder from below entered Skagway's consciousness. The engineer's hands appeared on the edge of the engine room hatch. Oil beneath his nails formed ten black half-moons at the tips of his fingers. His greasy face rose above the sill.

"Piping off the Fairbanks-Morse got torn loose somehow and dropped in the shaft alley of our port engine," said Kickup.

"How much damage?" Blackie asked him.

"Nothing permanent," said the engineer. "Threw all the pistons out of line. Made a mess of the shaft bearings. Take a helluva long time to fix."

Blackie's face darkened. "How long?"

Kickup wiped the back of an oily hand across his face and only succeeded in smearing more grease on his cheek. "We'll be a couple of days late striking the Pribilofs, if that's what you mean."

"That's what I mean," said Blackie.

THE Pribilofs were garmented with summer livery, a pastel riot of grasses and moss covering the slopes and casting limpid green hadows in the hollows. The beach seethed and heaved with one solid shimmering mass of barking, croaking, bellowing seals, and a mob of bachelors was frolicking out through the surf to meet the dory as she pulled away from the *Chatinika*.

"They said he was a lubber, Ranzo boys, Ranzo,
And made him eat whale blubber, Ranzo—"

"Will you shut up, Skagway," shouted Blackie from the bow, "and get us out of these crazy sikatches."

Skagway leaned hard on the tiller, veering the double-ended boat away from the cavorting animals. "They won't hurt anything," he muttered.

Huddled over her luggage just behind the after oarsman, Martia twisted toward him. "They will, Skagway. I've seen what can happen. Last year a couple of Aleuts in a baidar were trying to separate a bachelor from the herd. One of the men got excited and speared him. When the others smelled blood they stampeded and turned the boat over and killed—"

"That's different," he said. "The blood crazes them. I saw an old bull down on Bogoslov go wild when he smelled blood. He stampeded the whole herd right into the water."

The double-ender ground its bottom on the sand and Skagway jumped over the thwart. Green brine foamed around his sealskin mukluks as his feet churned the sandy bottom running the dory onto the beach. After beaching the boat, Skagway hoisted out Martia's two suitcases. They had searched the beach from the boat without sighting anyone, but Blackie stood now staring across the writhing bodies on the beach, running his thumb across his jaw.

"I told you that was crazy about Tabor," said Skagway. "Poaching is out of date. That piping must have worked loose and fallen into the shaft alley."

Blackie did not answer him, but Martia turned momentarily. "Are you going with Blackie and me across the island?"

"No, he's staying here!" Blackie's voice was harsh. He whirled around and picked up the suitcases. "It's a good two-hour walk to the village. Somebody's got to stay here and start taking census." He turned toward the bluffs, throwing the last over his shoulder to Skagway. "I told Kickup to take her off-shore a couple of miles. That wind coming up is liable to blow him on the rocks if he stays in too close."

Once, before they reached the bluffs, Martia turned to look back at Skagway. He started to wave, then dropped his hand. He took a black book and pencil from beneath his coat and started toward the first seals. The early sealing had been so profligate that it actually threatened the extinction of the animals, and to prevent this, a treaty was made between Japan, Great Britain, Russia and the United States whereby the sealing would be controlled by the governments interested, and since 1911, the Bureau of Fisheries had taken annual census of the herd and selected the surplus males among a certain age group to be killed for their hides.

Kickup was already pulling the *Chatinika* away as Skagway stopped at the first harem to take count. The bull was a great hoary old sultan that must have weighed six hundred pounds. He raised up on his lava throne, grumbling a warning at Skagway, and his harem of shimmering brown cows shifted nervously about him, barking and squealing. The *Chatinika* was out of sight in the fog lying off St. Paul and the wind had risen to a dismal howl by the time Skagway found the kench.

The wooden, trough-like structure was in a deep cove between two lava shelves and would be visible only from this narrow area at the open end of the cove. Skagway put his pencil and book away and worked through the seals toward the kench. He stopped on the lava shelf above the kench, looking down. The leathery skin tightened about his faded blue eyes till a network of seams surrounded them. The kench was full to the brim with salted hides.

"No, Skagway, don't go back to your dory for the rifle."

Skagway stopped his motion toward the boat. Then he turned back. Tabor stood on the rising shelf above him with an Enfield .380 in his hand.

"How did you get aboard to loosen that piping?" Skagway said finally.

"If you'll remember," grinned Tabor, "a bunch of Aleuts were paddling around in their baidars the day you hit Kodiak. Kickup shouldn't have let them aboard to trade for that tinned beef. In the confusion, my man got a chance at the piping on your Fairbanks-Morse. He assured me it would delay you four or five days. The coast guard cutter on this run doesn't pass until next Sunday. It would have given us plenty of time. How did you repair it so fast?"

"Maybe Kickup's a better engineer than your man figured," said Skagway. "You know what kind of headwind you're bucking?"

"I do," said Tabor. "The return is worth it. I've already got my contacts on the mainland. I'll make more on this one deal than I would in ten years off the halibut."

Skagway turned in the direction Tabor waved the Enfield and climbed up the shelf. He heard the shuffle of Tabor's mukluks as the man started up behind. A flock of black auks startled Skagway, whirring into the air with loud scraping cries as the two men climbed the lava. The breeze had been coming from the sea and that was why the stench had not reached Skagway before this. As he topped the rise, his mouth twisted with the nausea of that first fetid odor. Then he could see the carcasses.

TABOR'S men had driven a herd up from the beach and were separating it into pods of twenty or thirty. A pair of Aleuts working in a pod already separated, were in the act of stunning a young bachelor with a blow on the head. As the seal grunted, and sagged, the man with the knife stabbed him to the heart. Then, with swift, skillful strokes he made a circular cut around each fore-flipper. The skin came off like a bag with two holes where the flippers had been. Tabor waved the revolver again to one side. Skagway's jaw dropped a little when he saw them. Then he moved heavily through the soggy moss covering the bluff.

"Walked right into 'em," said Blackie Karne. He was sitting on the side of a half-filled kench.

Martia Bennet's eyes met Skagway's. They held a wide darkness. Tabor called over one of his Aleuts and handed him the Enfield, speaking to him in their own language. The men had finished skinning and salting the hides of this herd and they followed Tabor down the lava shelf to get another pod of bachelors from the rookeries there.

"They drive them up here to kill so it won't be visible from the sea," said Mar-

tia. "That's why we didn't spot them from the boat. Tabor didn't expect us to get here so soon but he wasn't taking any chances. As soon as Kickup pulls far enough away, Tabor's going to bring his boat in on this side of the cove where they can't spot her from the *Chatinika,* and load on the skins."

"That's taking a big chance on smashing against these rocks," said Skagway.

"Hasn't he already taken some big chances?" Her lips were pinched and white. She searched his face for something. Then she waved her hand vaguely at the Aleut guarding them. "You don't think—"

"No," said Blackie, raising his head. "They'll load the furs and shove off, that's all. We have nothing at all to worry about."

"Why not face it?" said Skagway. It turned both of them toward him sharply. He shrugged, looking at Martia. "Trying to spare you would only be silly. You can see it as well as we can. Tabor's got to have time to get away. If he leaves us here we'll jump for the *Chatinika's* radio the minute Kickup pulls back in. There's a dozen B. F. and coast guard boats between here and the mainland. Do you think Tabor's going to have that, after going this far?"

"But—" Blackie turned part way toward Martia—"a woman . . ."

"Indians don't look at a woman the same way we do, Blackie."

The blood had drained from Martia's face. Her lower lip trembled slightly. She clamped her mouth shut. She looked from Blackie to Skagway; then her eyes passed across the Aleut. She drew a thin breath between her teeth.

"He doesn't speak English very well," she said.

Skagway waited a minute, watching Blackie. The skipper met his gaze momentarily, without saying anything. Then Blackie's eyes shifted. Skagway licked his lips, turning to Martia.

"You game?" he said.

"It's better than waiting for it," she said.

"Then start bawling," said Skagway. "Make a big fuss over her, Blackie. Get her away from this kench."

Martia sniffled a couple of times. The Aleut glanced at her closely. Then she started crying loudly. Blackie slid down the kench toward her.

"No, no," he hissed at them. "He's right on top of us with that Enfield. He'll blow the hell our of us the minute we move. We can't do anything, Skagway—"

"Get her off that kench," Skagway said between his teeth.

Blackie made a half-hearted gesture toward Skagway with his hand. Then he saw Skagway's eyes. He put his arm around Martia's shoulder and helped her up. The Aleut took a step forward, grunting something. Blackie and Martia stumbled away from the kench. Skagway couldn't tell whether it was the girl pulling Blackie or not. She was bawling louder than ever. For that moment all the Aleut's concentration was on them. The Aleut took another step forward, shouting something. Skagway stooped over and grabbed a salted hide. He had whirled with it before his motion caught the Aleut's attention. It hit the Aleut full in the face as the man fired.

Skagway felt a blow on his leg that almost knocked it from beneath him as he threw himself at the man. He struck the Aleut while the hairy salted sealskin was still caught about the Aleut's face. Skagway saw the man's finger squeeze the trigger again but no sound came except a hollow click and the gun wasn't pointed the right way anyway. Skagway had the .380 torn from the man's hand before they hit the ground. He straddled him and raised up and struck with the gun butt. The sealskin was still across the Aleut's face as Skagway got to his feet. He took a lurching step and fell down again.

"I guess I shipped one," he said.

Martia was on her knees beside him. "Skagway . . ."

He broke the gun open. "This won't do no good. The first fired shell jammed in there. That's why it didn't go off the second time."

MARTIA took the .380 from him, tore her nails trying to rip the shell out. "Blackie, can't you do something?" she panted, shoving it at him. He tried to eject the shell without much success. Tabor's men had gathered down among the harems and were starting up the lava shelf.

"You and the girl get going," said Skag-

way. "You might make the village."

"Don't be a fool," said the girl.

"You going to throw away the only chance?"

"We're not leaving you," said Martia.

"But he's right," said Blackie. "This is our only chance, Martia. We could make the village."

She turned toward Blackie without saying anything. His eyes dropped before hers. Skagway shifted painfully.

"There's one other way."

"What?"

"There's still a lot of seals between us and Tabor."

It struck them about the same time. "Don't be a fool," said Blackie. "It'd be suicide. If the seals didn't get you, Tabor would. They've got guns."

"You're talking as if Skagway could do it," said Martia. "How could he get down there with a hole through his leg?"

They were both looking at Blackie now. He took a half-step backward. An odd putty color was beneath his beard.

"Think I'm crazy?" he said.

"It's the only chance, Blackie," said Skagway.

"No," said Blackie. "Don't be crazy. There couldn't be a chance."

Skagway looked up at him a moment. Then he got a clasp knife from his pocket and opened it and got up to his knees. His face grew white and twisted. He stumbled forward, catching the kench to keep himself from falling. The girl caught at him.

"Skagway—"

"Get her, damn you," Skagway bawled at Blackie. "Get her—"

"Don't be crazy, Martia." It was Blackie's voice behind him. "You'll never get out alive. Let him go. They've got guns."

"Skagway, Skagway, please, Skagway."

He stumbled on down the shelf with her yelling behind him and then lost it in the other sounds. Some of it was his own. He kept grunting in pain. Some of it was Tabor's. They shouted and began firing. The harems began to stir restlessly as the noise of the shots reached them over their own bedlam of barking.

He spotted the first big bull and lurched toward it. The rest was a crazy madness of running and stumbling crawling pain going down the lava with Tabor and the Aleuts shooting and screaming and coming up toward him. Skagway threw himself directly toward the bull.

He felt his knife blade sink into its throat, and ripped downward. The bull's bellow changed to a scream of pain. Then the heavy body struck Skagway. His hand was torn off the knife and he went to the ground with the sense of an infinite pulsing heaving screaming weight bearing him down. The deafening sound enveloped him.

He lay there in a stunned eternity beneath that black convulsion. It took him a long time to become aware the throbbing had changed to the region below his body.

Hazily, he rolled over, and saw it. The stream of blood the bull had left led down the lava shelf to the beach, and there the animal, still gushing from its crimson throat, was flopping toward the sea. The scent of its blood and its crazed actions and frenzied bellows had set the other harems off. Skagway could not see Tabor or the other men. The beach was not visible. It was hidden by a solid shimmering carpet of writhing, crawling, maddened seals all heading for the sea. It took a long time for Skagway to make out Tabor and his men. There were many bodies of the seals strewn on the beach, trampled by the others. Finally Skagway could see Tabor. He lay in a twisted, moveless heap.

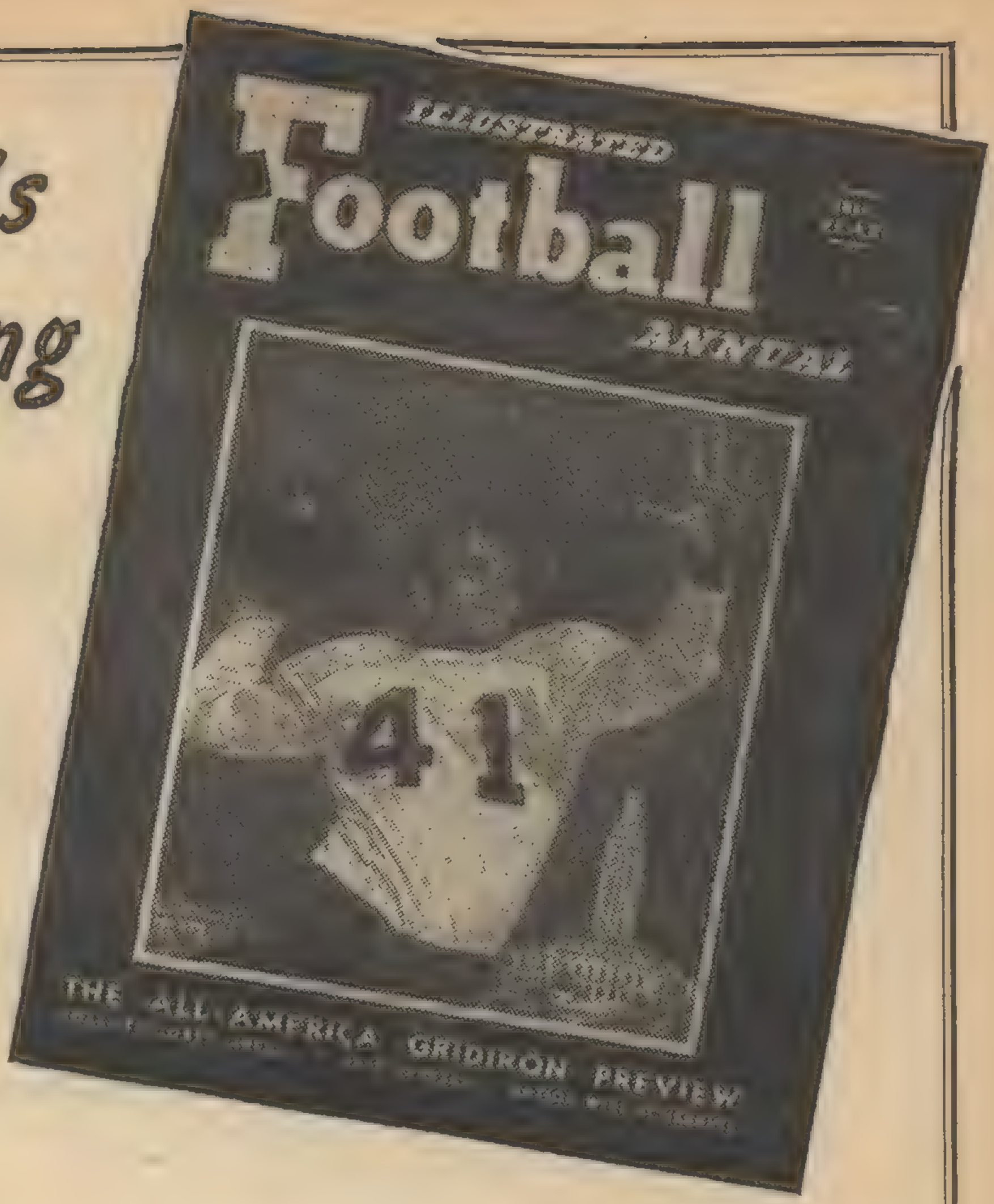
"Skagway . . . Skagway . . . Skagway . . ."

She said it three times like that, in a muted, husky whisper. She was kneeling by him, her hands touching his bloody face hesitantly.

Her lips were against his and that chestnut hair was soft on one side of his face before he realized what she was doing. He took a heavy, shaky breath.

"Don't take on so. That bull might have cracked a couple ribs rolling on me like that. No more." Past her head he could see Blackie Karne, just coming down the lava shelf. Suddenly he laughed. "You know," he said, "I think I'll take a stab at those master's papers when we get back to Kodiak."

What's Cooking With 1947 Football?



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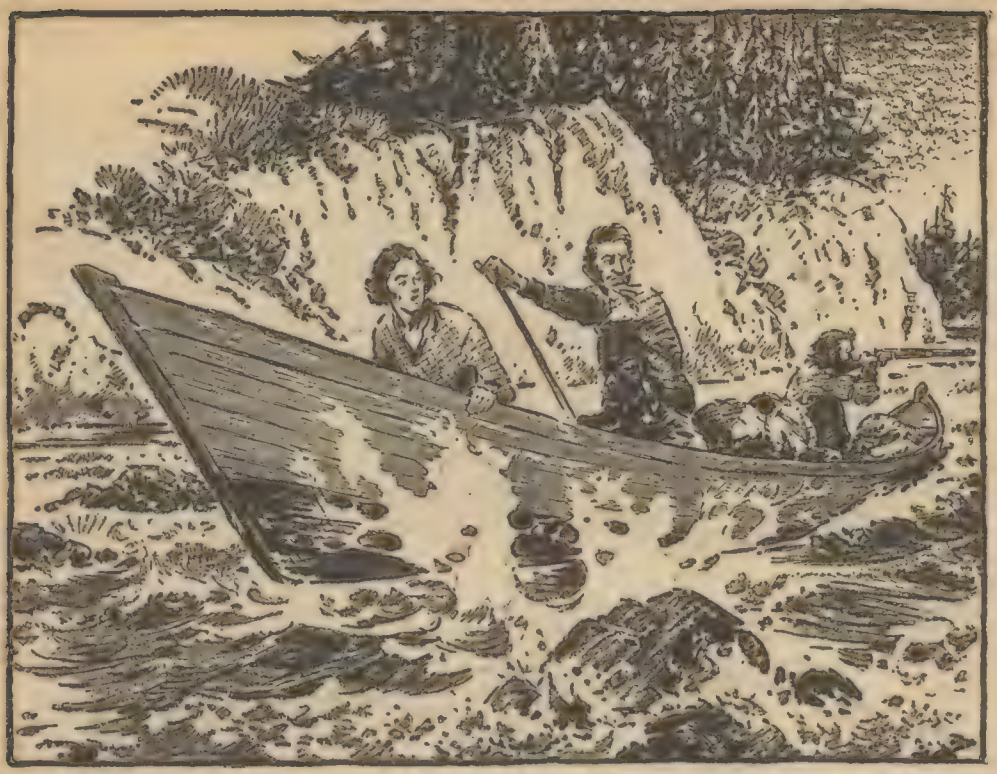

THE CAPTIVE

By DAN CUSHMAN

Le Vallon du Mort . . . *The Valley of Death.* Five went in. None came out. Fear-ridden sourdoughs laid it to the strange curse of *The Captive* . . . the beautiful half-breed she-devil who roamed its wastes and guarded its treasures with savage skill.

THE MORE STRAIGHT-THINKing residents of Porcupine were willing to laugh off three-fourths of the stories concerning "Le Vallon du Mort"—The Valley of Death. But there was one thing nobody laughed off, and that was the fact that several more men had entered the valley than ever came out.

The fact was even recognized by that remarkably unsuperstitious organization—the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

"Mon, it's a disgrace to the or-r-rganization!" the Hon. Bruce MacDonnough, Assistant Commissioner had said, strongly rolling his R's and driving his fist against the massive oak of Inspector Wigman's desk for combined emphasis.

And that was why Corporal Ralph Grady, temporarily transferred from Division C, found himself in plain clothes that June morning, standing on the rocky, forest street of Porcupine carefully surveying the camp.

Grady was angular, medium tall, thirty. His hair was lighter than is common with his Celtic race, and more unruly. His skin was burned dark by years of wind and snowglare. His eyes were blue; his nose, once straight, had been broken during a routine arrest at Battleford, and had knitted poorly leaving an off-center lump. He wore rough, sourdough clothes with deliberate sloppiness in order to deny any hint of military training, but something both crisp and sinuous in his movements made the clothes seem out of place.

He stopped a passing prospector.

"I was looking for Bill Heflin," he said in an easy voice.

"You haven't got far to look, stranger.

Heflin was hit. He fell, hanging for a second on the canoe's gunwhale.

This is Heflin's place right here. The Porcupine Commercial." The prospector thumbed at the shady interior. "That's the great man right there at the counter."

Grady found Heflin to be a powerful, heavy-jawed man of fifty. He was leaning over a rough-board counter, adding columns of figures.

Heflin didn't speak for a moment. He stared at the advancing Grady, adding figures in his head, then he wrote down the total and said,

"I overheard you asking for me."

"My name's Bob Williams," Grady said, shaking hands.

There was a direct and powerful quality about Heflin's way of looking at people.

"Prospector?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Looking for a grubstake, I suppose," he said with a note of disfavor.

Grady's eyes arched. "As a matter of fact, I am. But how the devil did you guess it?"

Heflin allowed a short laugh to jolt his shoulders. "Hell, man, I haven't been around gold camps these thirty years for nothing. I know when a man is planning to hit me up for a summer's supply of grub."

Grady met his eyes. "How about it then?"

"I used to grubstake everybody. And in the old days it was all right. Men came to look for gold, and they worked at it from sun-up till dark, running their assays by firelight. But now they take a man's grub and lie around in the shade of a jackpine till cold weather drives them back to Prince Rupert."

"I'm not that kind of a prospector," said Grady.

"Let me see your hands!"

Grady held them out, palms up. Heflin laughed. "No calouses! To my thinking a man without calouses is a damned poor risk. You'll have to pay cash for your grub, stranger."

Grady shrugged. "That decision may just cost you a million dollars."

"You sound confident. Whereabouts do you intend to prospect?"

"In the Vallon du Mort."

There was a tiny slitting of Heflin's eyes, and Grady could sense the tension which ran through his powerful frame.

"The Vallon du Mort? You're bluffing!"

"You think so? You think I'm the kind who'd be scared out by a bunch of damned

fool ghost stories? Listen, Heflin, I think there's gold in the valley, and I'm going in there and locate it. If some madman in that valley is waiting to kill me I'd advise him to get the first shot."

"Say! You sound like you really meant business."

"You bet I mean business."

Heflin walked around the counter, laying his broad hand on Grady's shoulder, "Lad—it does these old ears good to hear someone talk like that. And you're right. Nobody but a fool would believe all those stories about maidens luring men to death in the Nord rapids, or about black-whiskered giants pinning men under falling spruce trees. Men have died in the valley, I'll admit, but so have men died on the Porcupine and everywhere else."

"Give me the straight of it, Heflin. How many were there?"

"There was Jan Beaudin, my old partner. That was eight years ago this June. He went in and never came out, but he had dynamite along and was never very careful in using it. Then there were Stevens and Pine the summer before. No trace of them. Those Norwegians, Olson and Jorgenson were killed—but from understandable causes. Olson was caught under a falling tree, and Jorgenson was picked up drowned below the rapids. And that babbling fool, Watkins! He's the one who found Olson's skeleton under the tree, you know. He escaped on the run, scared out of a year's growth and telling about rocks being rolled down the cliffs at him by—but hell, Watkins always was a liar."

"I hear he took time to fill his pockets with nuggets and nothing could tempt him to go back for more."

Heflin didn't deny it. He stood back, hands on hips, looking into Grady's eyes.

"So you're really going to the Vallon."

"Of course."

Without saying more, Heflin strode behind the counter and commenced lifting out the usual grubstake articles—beans, self-rising flour, sowbelly, cartridges, tools, a two-pound bottle of mercury.

"How about a canoe?"

"I already have one."

Heflin finished with the provisions and leaned over the counter, rapping it with his knuckles for emphasis,

"And don't lose your guts. No matter what happens in there, remember there's a human explanation for everything. And remember to get that first shot!"

SUMMER dawn brok at two a. m., and Grady had already pushed the nose of his loaded canoe into the rapid current of Tuga River, one of the dozen streams which found their sources in the Stikine range to roar in white fury through glacier-filled valleys to the Pacific.

For five or six miles he made headway with a paddle. Swifter water forced him to stand and use a pikepole. When even that proved insufficient he lined the craft, wading shallow water along the rocky shore.

It took him two days to reach Twenty-mile house, a log cabin standing on a spit of land between the Tuga and the Nord.

Nord river was a smaller stream, flowing from a country of spruce-dark mountains. Beyond, in the far distance, the snow-sided peaks of the Vallon du Mort rose from gray drapes of mist.

Two days more placed him at the Vallon entrance where the river boomed in swift rapids between walls of sheer granite.

It was another day's work clinging to boulders and crevices in the wall, inching his canoe through the mile-long portal.

He had not eaten since morning, and at dark he flung himself face down on the bank, wet, dizzy from fatigue. The morning sun reflected from white pebbles at the water's edge when he awoke. He sat up and looked around.

The Vallon du Mort was about fifteen miles on its longest axis, its shape was an elliptical amphitheatre hemmed by peaks with summits deep in snow, the floor itself a series of hillocks covered by Northern spruce. The air was extremely brisk and pure, laden with evergreen.

Five minutes with a line and artificial fly yielded a fourteen inch cutthroat trout which Grady broiled over coals. He made a permanent lean-to camp in a small, natural clearing back from the river, and spent most of the afternoon on a rocky pinnacle sweeping the valley with binoculars. A black bear fished for trout in the riffles and deer grazed placidly.

In the morning he packed a light wolf-pack and set out to explore the valley.

A game trail led through deep timber. He came to a springhole deep-punched by

hoofs of deer. He stopped suddenly. Among the hoof marks he made out the imprints of small moccasins. They were the size which might be made by a boy of twelve or thirteen.

He searched for an hour without learning where the tracks led, and went on, senses now acute. It occurred to him that he was being watched. He tried to dismiss the impression but it persisted. It became so strong that once he spun around with rifle leveled expecting to see a man in the trail behind him. There was no one.

At mid-afternoon he came on the remains of a tent crushed beneath a fallen spruce.

The spruce had been down for three or four years and the camp bore signs of long weathering. He dug in the earth beneath it half expecting to find the skeleton of a man, but he found only fragments of rotted canvas, a shovel, and bits of camp equipment. He looked at the trunk butt. The tree had been chopped.

Anyone sleeping in the tent would have been awakened by the sound of the axe, so probably it had been dropped across the camp to serve as a warning. No witchcraft, anyway, and that served to settle Grady's nerves. At least he was on the trail of flesh and blood.

He returned to camp, following a narrow gulch from the river as darkness crept in from the forest. He paused and looked across the clearing to where his lean-to made a barely discernible triangle against the spruce trees. The night was silent save for the usual forest sounds—the vast roar of air currents through evergreens, the distant river, the closer scolding of a whisky-jack which hopped back and forth from one bush top to another.

Whisky-jacks act in such a manner and give warning of a lurking man—and they may act the same because of a rabbit, a skunk, or simply nothing at all.

Grady waited, making no sound and not showing himself. It was almost dark when he decided that the camp had been unmolested, and started across the tiny clearing.

A sound came to him. He drew up suddenly, swinging his rifle waist high. Something whisked the air above him. A falling branch. There was a clash of metal simultaneous with the instant it touched earth. Then silence—a silence that was long-drawn and intense.

The moon crept over between two trees, sending a long beam of light to the earth just in front of the lean-to. There he could see a dead tree branch clutched in the powerful steel jaws of a bear trap.

The trap had been waiting for him, and someone had deliberately tossed the branch to spring it.

He backed into the brush. Once out of sight, he ran with long, silent strides to the spot where the whisky-jack had been raising its commotion.

He stopped to listen. A dead twig snapped. The sound telegraphed danger and he leaped aside.

The blackness was cut by yellow flame. A gunshot. It was close. He could feel the wave of concussion striking his chest. The bullet was a trifle over his head.

HE went down face forward expecting a second bullet. He fired one blind shot straight ahead.

The soft sound of running feet came to him. Brush crackled, there was a cry, the sound of a falling body.

He stood and walked forward, rifle ready, his woodsman's instinct keeping him on the path. The steep side of the gulch fell away beneath him. He lowered himself. There was a sheer drop of twelve feet or so to the rocky ground. His moccasin touched something he instantly recognized as a human body.

He bent and found the form lying face up, arms flung out. It was too dark to see. He listened, and heard the sound of breathing. His hands moved swiftly, feeling for the blood that would indicate a wound. He found the open shirt collar, then he stopped as shock ran through him. His fingers had sunk deeply in the soft warmth of a woman's breast.

He picked her up and carried her to and area of moonlight. He laid her down and looked at the lovely, reposed face of a girl.

There was no bullet wound. A bruise showed red along her temple. The fall had knocked her unconscious, but she showed signs of coming around.

She was small, her age about twenty. She was dressed like a boy in rough, woolen trousers, gray flannel shirt, moc-

casins. Her hair was dark, and it lay in thick, lustrous waves around her face.

He noticed that her eyes were open and she was looking at him.

She spoke—"You mustn't stay here!"

Sound of her own voice seemed to frighten her. She sat up.

"You'll die if you stay here!"

"I don't intend to die for a long time yet," Grady answered in a good-humored voice. "Now lie down."

She didn't seem to hear him. She remained as she was, braced with hands resting on the ground behind her, her eyes dark as forest shadows.

He went on talking, keeping his voice modulated in an effort to make her trust him, "You got a mean blow in the head falling over that bank. I was afraid your skull was fractured. You feel pretty fair now, but by morning you'll think your head is splitting right down the middle. It will be worse the more you move around. I'll start a fire and roll you in warm blankets. Maybe a little tea or—"

"You'll have to go!"

Grady smiled. She tried to rise, but his hand was on her arm. She struggled to free herself, but she might have been fighting the jaws of a bear trap for all the good it did her.

"You're a strange kid. You try to put a bullet through me one minute, and the next you're worrying for fear somebody will kill me. Or wasn't it you who fired that shot?"

"Yes it was me!" she answered defiantly. "But I wasn't trying to kill you. I only wanted to frighten you into leaving, because if you don't—"

"Sure, I know. If I don't get out the killer-in-chief will get to me. Just who is the killer-in-chief anyhow?"

She closed her lips, pressing them to a thin, straight line.

He asked, "Who set that bear trap in the camp?"

She didn't answer.

"Thanks for springing it anyway," he grinned. "But next time you use a bullet to scare me, try getting it an inch or two higher. That last one parted my hair."

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Bob Williams."

"Why are you here?"

"I'm a prospector."

"Who sent you?"

"Maybe I sent myself."

He waited for her to ask some more, and when she didn't—"who did you think would send me?"

She didn't answer.

He went on, speaking in the old, easy tone, "Now that I've been perfectly frank with you, why don't you be the same? Who are *you?*"

After a long pause—"I'm—Marthe."

"Marthe *who?*" She just looked at him, so he asked, "Where are you from?"

"I live here."

"In the valley? Alone?"

She didn't answer.

"Who set the bear trap?"

She simply looked at him. Het let go her arm, and with unexpected quickness she sprang to her feet, took two steps backward, turned, and commenced running along the poor game trail that followed the bed of the gulch.

But Grady had been manhunter too long to be taken by the trick. He cut off her retreat with a half-dozen long strides, seized her wrists, twisted them behind her. He let her struggle for a moment.

"I'm sorry, Marthe. I really meant what I said about the warm blankets and tea."

"You mean I'm your prisoner?"

"If you want to put it that way."

He released her, expecting to have to chase her again, but she did not try to escape. She walked with him back to camp, making no protest when he told her to go inside the lean-to and wrap herself in a blanket.

She sat in the low doorway watching him build a tiny fire, brew tea, fry bacon and hotcakes. She seemed lovelier than ever by the yellow flames of the fire, her hair dark with glints of color, her skin tanned and smooth with a peach-down softness.

While she was eating, Grady had a look at the bear trap.

It had been concealed beneath twigs and needles, jaws open, pan ready. He hefted it. It weighed forty or fifty pounds and would probably have snapped the bones of his leg. He was sure the girl couldn't have carried it there.

"Nice of you to spring that for me," he said. "You still haven't told me who set it at my front door."

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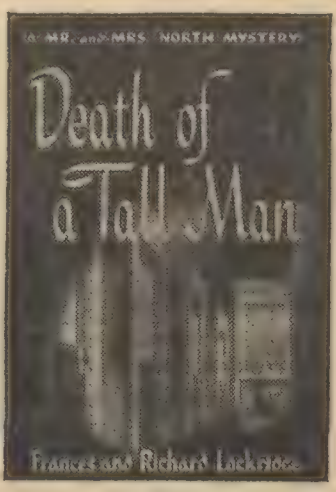

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"I set it! I watched you leave this morning and did it then. I stayed here all day, hidden, waiting to make sure you walked into it. Then I decided to give you another chance, so I threw the stick and sprung it."

"Sure. And maybe you're responsible for all the other mysteries in the valley. Maybe you did away with Stevens and Pine. That was nine years ago. I'd guess you were about eleven then. And Beaudin. Then there was Olson caught under the chopped-down tree. And Jorgenson whose skull was caved in before he was tossed into the rapids, there. Maybe you did all of those things."

He laughed in his easy manner and went on, "Come on, girl, you haven't anything to be scared of. Tell me what's behind all this mystery."

"I can't!" Her voice was no longer defiant. She was almost in tears. "I can't tell you. Please don't ask me any more."

The fire died and Marthe lay back in the spruce bed, the blanket drawn close around her. She made no movement, but Grady knew she was awake. After an hour her breathing became regular, and a relaxing of her bodily tension told him she had gone to sleep in spite of herself.

II

GRADY sat and watched the embers fade in a fragile shell of ash. He rolled and smoked one cigarette after another. Stars dimmed and dawn came up, filling the lean-to with a diffused grayness.

He stood and looked in on her face. All fear and defiance was gone, leaving in its place only a girlish innocence.

He walked to the cutbank and located the gun she had dropped. It was an old .44 Winchester. She was still asleep when he returned. He leaned the rifle against a fallen trunk, dug some coals from beneath the ashes, and kindled the breakfast fire.

When he turned around the lean-to was empty.

He first thought she had escaped, then a movement caught his eye. She was standing with the .44 Winchester in her hands, the barrel shoulder high and level, the hammer racked back, her forefinger on the trigger.

Grady exhaled and let his hands fall to his sides. He stood straight and very still. He knew the danger of making any move. The girl was not really a killer, and that made her all the more dangerous. He must not frighten her into squeezing the trigger.

He spoke, "Put the gun down, Marthe. I don't mean you any harm."

She shook her head, keeping the barrel level. "You want to take me outside the valley. You want to make me tell."

"Tell what?"

She did not answer.

"What would I want to make you tell?"

"Stand back or I will shoot!"

It occurred to Grady that she was more lovely than ever with the angry light in her eyes, the color in her cheeks, her head held high.

He asked, "What are you going to do?"

"I will kill you if you do not go."

He took a deep breath, smiling a little. "Then I'll go."

"Now. Get your canoe."

The canoe was cached beneath an undercut ledge. She swung the rifle, keeping Grady covered as he lifted it out, boosted it overhead, and carried it to the river's edge.

He placed it in the water. "Can I pack up my camp?" he asked.

"No. It would be too much weight. Your canoe must be light to escape the rocks in the rapids. Keep to the left wall until you're half way through, and then follow the middle. If you are a canoeman you will get through alright."

Grady crouched in the bottom of the canoe while it drifted slowly in the current backwash. He drove the paddle sending it to the first grasp of the rapids.

The girl followed along shore.

A side current caught the craft, almost whipping it from Grady's control. He shifted his weight, leaning on the paddle to bring it into line. Straight ahead he could see the current foaming over a row of sharp-toothed rocks. The girl had warned him to follow the other side but he deliberately went straight on.

He could hear her screaming, "Left side! Pull for the left side!"

In another ten seconds it was too late. He could not have escaped to the left bank of the river had he wished. The roar of swift water was all around him.

A pointed rock projected from the cur-

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rent. It seemed that the river was standing still with the rock racing towards him, leaving a streak of foam.

Grady was an old hand with a canoe paddle, and even at this late moment he might have maneuvered safely through had he chosen. Instead he flipped the paddle, twisting the canoe sidewise.

The rock struck. There seemed to be scarcely a sound as the canoe crumpled. For a second it hung there, swinging slowly, the cold greenish water flooding its gunwale. Then listlessly it rolled over.

The girl's scream came to Grady's ear as the icy water closed over him.

A rock shelf ran along the bank, and his plan had been to swamp the canoe so a couple of swimming strokes would carry him to its safety, but the unexpected swiftness of the current had thrown him off.

He was dragged down by woolen clothing, submerged rocks slamming his side.

A rock rose in front of him. He clutched it, keeping his head free.

MARTHE was running along the shore, a dead cottonwood branch in her hands. She held the branch far out, wading until the swift water boiled to her thighs. He managed to clutch the brittle tip of the branch with one hand. He swam with the other as she pulled him to shallow water.

He fell face forward on the gravel shore. She tried to help him to his feet. He pretended unconsciousness. She crouched beside him. He could hear her rapid breathing. One of the rocks had split the skin of his forehead and she commenced sponging blood with her handkerchief.

It was comfortable with his head in her lap and he lay quite still. At last he moved, moaning softly.

"You're all right?" she whispered.

"Dizzy," he muttered. "I can't see... have to have...help."

She helped him to his feet. There was a knife thrust of pain from his ankle and he almost fell again. He hadn't noticed it before, but his right ankle was sprained. There was something humorous about his putting on this act and then needing her help after all.

She half supported him as he hobbled back to camp. There he lay on the bed of spruce boughs watching her build up the fire and boil a mixture of roots and spruce bark to make hot compresses for his ankle.

The day passed, and it gave him a feeling of contentment being near her. She cooked the noon meal. Afterward the sun came up quite warm, and tired from his long vigil of the night before, he slept.

He awoke with a start, shivering in the chill of evening.

"Marthe!" he called, sitting up.

There was no answer. The fire had shrunken to a heap of feathery ash.

He stood, trying his ankle. It bore his weight, though the swelling made a large bulge when he tied his moccasin. His rifle and Colt revolver were as he had left them. He made a pack of blankets and provisions and set out through evening shadow trying to find some sign of the girl's passage.

With darkness he rolled in the blankets and slept. He awoke suddenly with the distant echoes of a rifle still in the air.

He listened, but there was only the one shot. He rolled cigarettes and smoked them, waiting for dawn.

There came a slight odor of burning spruce. The fresh dawn breeze came from north-west, so he moved in that direction, avoiding the trail, walking on silent moccasins.

The sun grew warm. It had been up three or four hours when he came on the water drenched remnants of a campfire.

He pressed his hands in the damp ashes. They were still warm. Ferns and grasses were just rising after being trampled by many feet. In the soft earth he found the impression of a man's booted foot, and the spot where a rifle stock had rested. He noticed that the butt plate of the rifle had been cracked across the middle.

He followed the tracks which led on across the valley floor to the north-west. As near as he could guess there were six men. Maybe only five.

A hundred paces from the camp he almost stumbled over the disjointed looking form of a man sprawled in a clump of low buckbrush.

He was dead. A man of about forty, his face weather-browned, covered by two or three weeks' growth of reddish whiskers.

Grady knelt beside him, feeling for the warmth of his body. He had been dead at least three hours. A bullet had entered his chest just beneath the heart, had glanced from a rib and torn on just beneath the shoulderblade. It had been a large-calibre of moderate velocity, and the thought of Marthe's .44 Winchester flashed in his mind.

He searched the man but found no identification.

This was not the first dead man Grady had found in the course of his profession, and it should not have unnerved him, but it did. His hands were nervous, and droplets of perspiration appeared along his hairline. The thought of that .44 Winchester stuck in his mind.

His ankle did not improve through travel, and the moccasin lacings had become tight.

He ate a midday lunch of cold bannock. By late afternoon half of the valley was crossed. With twilight he moved more slowly, watching for firelight through the trees.

There was no breeze, so the tremble of a leaf cluster at the tip of a high-bush cranberry branch telegraphed danger. An ambush.

He spun on his good foot, diving to earth. Three guns smashed in unison. Bullets rattled through the underbrush.

For the second he was safe, protected by a massive, moss-crusted cedar log. But he knew the ambushers would circle through cover of forest and darkness.

With swift, catlike movements he twisted over, catching himself on outflung arms, repeating the movement again and again until he reached the root-end of the log.

He came to a crouch, his rifle cocked. There was a movement—a man sliding around the high-bush cranberry thicket to get him from the back.

Grady fired, aiming by instinct. The flash of powder blinded him, obliterating the moving shadow. Instinct told him the bullet had connected. He got down as answering shots sliced the night and bullets thudded the spongy heart of the fallen spruce.

A man was running, crashing brush, cursing. He was wounded, though not seriously by the sound of him.

Grady crept to the four-foot depression left when the spruce was uprooted. On the other side was a tiny cluster of second-growth, and beyond that the safety of forest shadow.

There was no moon yet, and a slight mist had settled to the treetops.

He moved in a wide circle, and after an hour returned to the game trail.

A WOLF howled, echoing over the night silence. The moon rose, shining brilliantly on the snow-covered mountains and accentuating the deep shadows of the valley. He searched for the ambushers' camp, but the valley lay in peacefulness so unbroken he might have been the last living creature in all existence.

In the morning he climbed to a pinnacle a thousand feet over the valley floor. He saw a tiny lake pocketed between deeply timbered hills, and sitting near it in a tiny clearing was a cabin.

Weeds had been mowed around the cabin, its shake roof was in repair, and the path leading to the water was smooth from recent wear.

A woman walked from the cabin carrying a bucket. She climbed a zig-zag path to a spring. It was too far to make out her face, but her gait told Grady the woman was Marthe.

He was impatient to be away now that he had found her, but his lawman's instinct told him to stay where he was, and watch. The sun crept around to afternoon. It was late when he started down, going slowly across angular slide rock and windfalls.

In the lower forest there was no hint of the lake or the cabin's position. He kept steadily going like a man who has taken a compass bearing. Unexpectedly the forest opened, and he was at the edge of the lake. One corner of the cabin's roof was just visible among the evergreens.

It was evening now. A slight odor of woodsmoke came to him. He skirted the lake keeping out of sight, and paused within a stone's throw of the cabin.

Someone was moving around inside. A woman's figure was briefly visible near the open door. No sound of voices. He decided that Marthe was there alone.

He walked across the little clearing to the front door.

"Marthe!"

He caught the impression of her surprised movement though it was too dark to see a great deal inside.

"You followed me!" she said.

He opened the home-made, netted door and stepped inside. There was just enough light to make out the general features of the room. It was scrubbed and immaculate, furnished with home-made willow and puncheon chairs. Marthe, who stood facing him, wore a cotton dress.

"You shouldn't have come here!" she whispered.

"Why?"

"Stop asking me *why!* You're in danger, that's all. He'll kill you next time."

"Who?"

She didn't answer his question. She said, "He'll be here any minute. He's late now. You mustn't let him find you here. I told him you were dead."

"Then he knows about me. But of course—there was the bear trap. I knew you didn'n have the strength to carry it there, nothing about setting it. How did you explain my escape from that?"

She simply stood staring at him, eyes darker than the shadow of the room.

He went on. "Was he one of the fellows who tried to put a bullet through me last night?"

"I—don't know."

"There are some others prowling your valley. I suppose—"

"You'll have to go. Now! It won't be easy for me if he finds out that I lied."

He walked towards her, placing his hands on her shoulders. She seemed frail and small—smaller than ever now with the dress on. Pity for her aloneness swept through him. He suddenly felt the desire to give up the entire mission, and take her away, take her far from this strange, evil valley that held her in bondage.

"You'll have to come with me. Then it won't make any difference what he finds out."

"No."

WITHOUT realizing his action, he had drawn her close. Her small hands clutched the rough, gray flannel of his shirt. She was looking up at him, her lips parted a trifle, her rapid breath warm against his throat.

A pebble rattled outside and heavy footsteps trod the path. She pushed herself away.

"Quick!"

"Let me face this out!" he whispered savagely.

"No." her voice had a tone of pleading he could not refuse. "The back door!"

She led him to the door. After a second's hesitation she stepped outside with him. She lifted her apron to dry her eyes. It was the first realization Grady had that she was weeping.

The man walked inside, his heavy step shaking the little cabin.

"Marthe!"

Her shoulders was pressed against Grady's chest. She was looking at the door.

"Marthe!" the man called again.

She answered, "Just a moment, Jan."

The man struck a match, the sudden, reddish flare illuminating his face.

He was big, massive of shoulder, his hair was long, his broad face covered by a deep growth of whiskers. He might have been forty, or even fifty—the beard made it hard to judge.

He carried the match to a grease-dip and lighted it.

"Where are you, Marthe?"

"I was getting some wood."

She seized a few sticks and started back. Grady took her wrist, spinning her around.

"Let me go!" she whispered.

"Who is that man?"

She tried to pull free, but his fingers were as strong as a steel trap. "Who is he?"

She stood straight, looking him in the eyes. The fear was gone from her body now. Instead there was the same challenge he had seen there on their first meeting.

She said, "He's my husband!"

Her words seemed to stun him. He let her go, and a second later she had moved past him and was inside.

The whiskered man stood staring at her. There was something fierce and wild in his eyes. He watched Marthe as she carried the sticks to the wood box and dropped them in.

"There's enough wood in there, girl! Are you crazy?"

"I—hadn't noticed."

The man kept looking at her with his

disconcerting eyes. He didn't look like the type which is fooled easily.

There was someone here this afternoon," he said.

"Here?" She tried to look surprised, then she shook her head. "You mean around the house?"

"Have you been here all the while?"

"Yes."

"I saw a man's footprint down by the lake. I tried to find his trail but it was too dark." He spoke slowly, his heavy voice so low that it barely reached Grady outside the rear door. The girl watched him with fixed eyes.

"You think he was spying on us?"

"I don't know."

It had taken a while for the tallow in the home-made grease-dip to melt and its flame to climb high. The whiskered man lifted it now, tilting it so the rays would fall across the clean-scrubbed floor.

Something on the floor attracted his attention. He stepped over, bent. The dust-gray track of Grady's moccasin was visible on the freshly scrubbed floor.

He stood, tossing back his uncut hair. "Where is he?"

Marthe stared at him. She backed away until her shoulders suddenly collided with the stone fireplace. Its contact seemed to scare her. She spun around, and slid along the wall.

He strode after her, raising his voice, "There was a man here—in this house. I know who it was. It was that fellow from back at the rapids. I should have killed him when I first saw him. He's a mounted policeman, I tell you! I knew that when I saw his lean-to. Mounted policemen always toss up that kind of a lean-to. They teach them that in training."

She reached a corner and stopped.

"Where is he?" the man demanded.

He walked towards her. His hand shot out and closed on her forearm.

Grady flung the door open and stepped inside.

The whiskered man spun around.

He swung his shoulders with a movement that made his ragged jacket open.

And old-time Colts revolver hung in a holster at his waist. For the moment Grady thought he was going to draw.

Grady's hand streaked down. The blue

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steel of his heavy revolver flashed in the lamplight. He hesitated short of pulling the trigger. The big man had not gone for his gun. Instead he was lunging forward with hands thrust out in the manner of a wrestler.

Grady fell back, trying to fend him off. The girl screamed and dived between them. She clutched the barrel of Grady's revolver in both hands, falling with it.

He spun, trying to avoid her, and at that moment the whiskered man collided with him.

He was heavy, outweighing Grady by fifty pounds. He carried Grady against the log wall.

Grady struck the wall with both shoulders, his right leg propped behind him. He came out, the propped leg giving him unexpected force and quickness, throwing the big man off balance.

Grady pumped a left to the stomach and whipped a right to the jaw.

The blows staggered the big man.

Grady tried to circle him, but the big man clinched, wrestling him to the wall. The bench was against Grady's knees. He tried to fight his way free, but the man was too close absorbing the blows short of their apex.

Time thus gained allowed the big man to shake off the effects of the blows he had received. His arms were around Grady, bearing down, wringing breath from his lungs.

His strength was like nothing human. It was on the brute scale of a silvertip bear. Grady's lungs were bursting for breath, the room was spinning across his glazed eyes.

With a desperate effort Grady managed to force his arm between them. His forked fingers found the nerve centers of the man's neck. With his final strength he rammed the fingers home.

The big man screamed. His hold relaxed. For the instant he was shocked to a sort of paralysis. Grady set his feet and swung a right. It connected with the big man's jaw, snapping his head to one side, spilling his long hair across his face.

The man staggered and half fell over the woodbox. Grady came on swinging again.

Marthe screamed. It was too late when Grady saw the reason. The man came up with a two-foot length of stovewood in his hand. He swung the club in an overhand arc, and the room dissolved in darkness before Grady's eyes.

III

WHEN Grady awoke he was in the cabin. It was night. His head seemed to be splitting down the middle.

He closed his eyes and the pain eased, a drugged feeling covering his brain. He was too tired to wonder much about Marthe and the black-whiskered man she called her husband. He slept and awoke suddenly with his throat parched, the pain almost gone.

He turned in the bunk tossing off the blanket that had been spread over him. The room was dark with the door and windows marked by grayish patches of moonlight. It occurred to him that they had gone, leaving him there.

Then he heard moccasins brushing the floor, and a shadow came up beside him. He knew it was Marthe.

He started to get up, but her warm hand closed on his shoulder. She was unexpectedly strong. He lay back.

"You're awake," she said. "I was afraid..."

"Where is he?"

"Jan?"

"Your husband."

She took a quick breath and stood quite close to him as several seconds passed.

"He's—gone."

"Why didn't he kill me?"

"Because he loves me and I asked him not to."

"So he went away leaving the two of us here alone?" he asked with a note of incredulity.

"Yes." She spoke the word simply. "Jan is not a murderer—*Corporal Grady.*"

Sound of his name was like a blow delivered in the dark. Ever since leaving Battleford he had traveled under the name of Bob Williams. He remembered his papers and badge that had been hidden in the money belt inside his clothes. They had searched him and found it.

She said, "You are of the mounted police."

There was no use denying it. "Yes."

"Why did you come here?"

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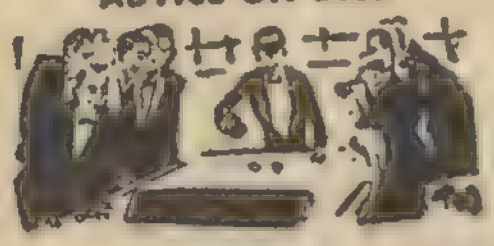

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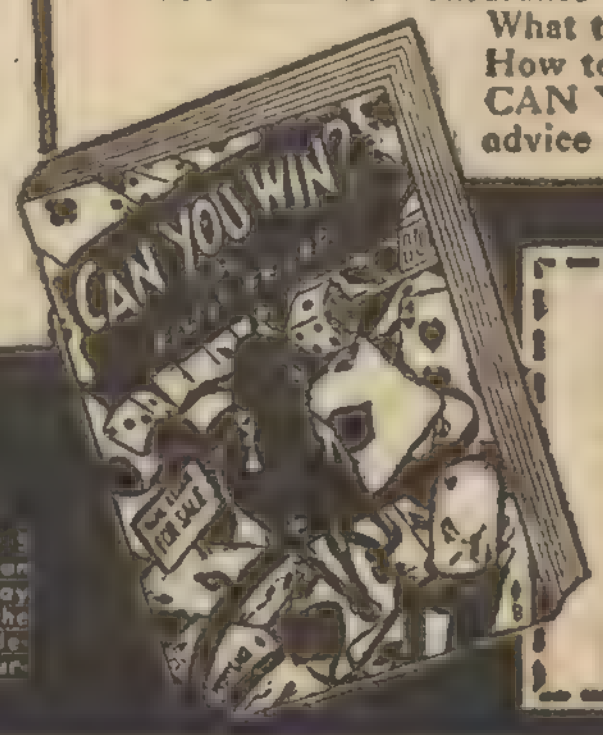

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"Because people were dropping out of sight in this valley. We had to find out the truth."

"The *truth?*"

Her question was like a challenge. "Yes the truth!"

He waited for her answer, and when she simply stood in silence he asked,

"Did you think a mounted policeman *wouldn't* want to learn the truth?"

She spoke in a softer voice, "If I'd believed that I would not have begged for your life."

"Where is he now—your husband?"

"Gone. And when he gets back you must not be here. There is no telling what he might do. You must get out of the valley. I have promised him you would."

She spoke simply, with evident confidence that he would not fail her. She had saved his life, and now he owed it to her to do as she asked. Yet he could not leave the valley with his mission not accomplished.

He asked, "When will he return?"

"At dawn, perhaps."

Despite her words she was not anxious for him to go. She stood close to him—so close he could feel the warmth of her breath when she spoke.

He asked, "What are you doing here, Marthe? You don't love that man."

She didn't answer.

He went on, "You couldn't love him. Not that—"

"Please!"

He stopped talking, but the memory of the fellow's savage face stuck in his mind. He revolted from the idea of her being his wife.

His hand went out and closed on her arm. She made no resistance as he pulled her close to him. She sat on the edge of the bunk, her slim body close.

He said, "If I leave this valley, you'll go along. The two of us, Marthe. We'll go away. So far nobody will find us."

She seemed to be holding her breath. She sat so close, so still, that he could hear the rapid beat of her heart.

"You're going with me!" he repeated savagely.

Her hand groped and found his. Even as close as they were it was too dark to see her face. He took her by the shoulders and drew her close. She made no resistance. She came to him willingly, her lips parted, waiting for his.

He had no idea how long he held her in his arms. At last she pushed him away.

"You'll have to leave. It's almost daylight."

He said, "You're going with me!"

"Sometime—perhaps."

"Now."

He could hear the musical sound of her laugh. Her shadow moved between him and the window then disappeared through the door.

He sprang up to follow. A pain seemed to split his skull. He staggered, and stood for a few seconds holding the wall. When he steadied himself and got to the door, Marthe was nowhere in sight.

HE stood in the door watching daylight grow across the clearing, thinking about the fevered happenings of the night just past. It had all the qualities of a first-class dream. He might even have thought it a dream were it not for the throb of pain that remained in his abused skull. He thought about his plan to leave the valley with her, to desert the Mounted, his task unaccomplished. It was fantastic, of course. Grady would never desert for the love of a pretty girl. He would see this thing through. A girl like Marthe was guilty of no crime and therefore the truth could not hurt her.

A little water stood in the bucket. He drank some of it and poured the remainder over his burning head. Then he filled up on cold bread and beans.

His rifle was leaning against the back of the house just as he had left it the night before. He levered open the mechanism to make certain a cartridge was ready in the barrel. Then he dropped it in the crook of his arm and started across the clearing.

He skirted the rocky lake shore, found a game trail leading back across the valley. He intended to follow the trail until he reached the Nord, and then swing back toward camp at the valley entrance. He had an idea that the ones who tried to ambush him would go there looking for him.

He mounted a little knoll and started down. He drew up suddenly. Five men were right below walking single file.

None of them had noticed him. For a

second he thought they would pass without looking his way, but their leader, a heavy-set man, drew up muttering a curse under his breath, starting to bring around the rifle he carried. But his eyes rested on the rifle angling carelessly towards him. He stopped, and his gaze met Grady's.

With a start Grady realized that the man was Heflin—the same Heflin who had grubstaked him back in Porcupine.

"Williams!" Heflin exclaimed. He acted pleased. His voice was deep and cordial. He strode up the incline, extending his powerful hand. "By the gods, Williams, I'm relieved to see you. We ran across your camp back at the rapids with nobody there and had about decided the killers of this infernal valley had notched you on their guns."

Grady kept the rifle barrel at the same angle and did not offer to extend his hand. Heflin stopped, letting his arm fall to his side. There was an expression of puzzlement on his face.

"Oh I say, Williams! You don't think for a minute..."

That you were the ones who tossed those ambush slugs at me?" Grady laughed. "I don't know, Heflin. Let's put it this way—if it was you, it was a mistake."

"No, you got us wrong. We haven't fired a shot since we came in the valley. Not a one. But I don't blame you for being suspicious. I'd be suspicious of everybody if I was in your boots."

Heflin didn't try to come any closer. He carried a heavy Enfield revolver in a holster strapped around his waist outside his mackinaw, but he was careful to keep his hands a long way from its butt. A thin, beak-nosed halfbreed stepped to one side, rifle on his arm. The other three stood their ground cautiously.

Heflin asked, "Did somebody try to bushwhack you?"

"Yes. Night before last."

Heflin nodded. "You'd better string along with us, Williams. There's a madman killer in this valley. There's only one way to handle him. We'll have to find his hide-out and fill him with rifle lead."

Grady was certain that these were the ones who had tried to ambush him, but aside from keeping his rifle ready he gave

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no hint of his conviction. Heflin turned and walked to a place where the trail widened. He sat on a log. His men ranged around him, two on each side.

"Do you know Fred Chastee?" Heflin asked, tilting his head in the direction of the big-beaked halfbreed.

Chastee grinned, showing a set of browned teeth. He made no move to extend his hand, apparently realizing that Grady would be too cautions to take it.

Heflin went on, jerking his head to indicate in turn each of the others, "This is Reynolds; Brandt; and Jack Brown. They're all miners from Porcupine. I guess you weren't around town long enough to get acquainted."

JACK Brown, a dirty-looking man with gray-edged hair and whiskers stained from tobacco-chewing grinned with an air of mock friendliness. He shuffled forward, rubbing the palm of his right hand on his sourdough pants.

"Shake?" he asked, grinning more broadly than ever to show he thought Grady's anticipated refusal was a good joke.

Grady watched him coldly, not moving, keeping the rifle muzzle between them.

"None of that, Jack!" Heflin barked. "Williams is suspicious, and I don't blame him a damned bit. A man gets to doubting his own grandmother after he dodges a few shots in the dark." Then to Grady. "Did you run across the signs of anyone up the trail?"

"There's a cabin."

"Ha! So you found it. Was anyone there?"

"There was last night."

"A man and a woman."

"Yes."

"You've been watching the place all night?"

Grady nodded his head.

"What did the fellow look like? Big? Black whiskered—about fifty?"

"Yes."

Heflin grinned. "That's Jan Beaudin. I've always suspected he was the one. Beaudin disappeared in here about eight years ago but I never believed that he was killed. He was a murderer, you know. Wanted by the police for killing an Injun trader named Matt Reegas, so he holed up here in the valley and shot every man who set foot inside. I never told anybody about my suspicions before. You see Beaudin was my old partner. I thought a lot of Beaudin. We were like brothers, but sometimes even a brother has to take up a rifle. Right?"

Grady nodded. He hunkered on his heels, waiting for Heflin to say more. He remembered that the record back in Edmonton had something to say about Beaudin being one of the suspects in a murder, but there had been no proof.

Heflin was speaking, "And you say there was a woman too? Yes, there would be. She was young, wasn't she? About twenty?"

"Yes."

Heflin spat. "She's a renegade. A beautiful renegade, and just about as dangerous as he is. I suppose she told you she was his daughter!" He cast a sharp look at Grady but failed to read anything in his weather-toughened face. "Well, she isn't. She had a run-in with the law over on Telegraph Creek. A dance hall girl and she poured chloride of mercury in a fellow's whiskey. Imagine that! She's been here for a couple of years by what Watkins said."

Grady recalled the girl calling the Whiskered man "Jan" so it was entirely probable that he was Beaudin as Heflin said. Escape from the law, whether a man is originally guilty or not, is often sufficient cause for turning one into a killer, but no stretch of his imagination could place Marthe in a dance hall, or make her a poisoner.

Heflin was watching his face closely, trying to judge the effect of his story. Chastee, the halfbreed, drew out a tobacco pouch of tanned deer's bladder and a book of brown papers. He twisted a cigarette, his long, brown fingers working by feel, his pointed eyeballs never moving from Grady. He struck a match, puffed, and flipped it to the ground a foot from Gray's toe. He squatted down, smoking, letting his rifle lean across his thigh with the barrel extending upward beyond his left ear. It was a Winchester lever action of .38 or .44 calibre. Grady could see the butt. The original steel butt-piece had been removed and replaced with a lighter one of black composition which had later broken across the middle. Grady remembered see-

ing its impression in the ground back at the camp where the man had been murdered.

Heflin said, "You met that girl and talked to her, didn't you?"

"She took a shot at me," said Grady.

"But you talked to her!"

"What are you getting at?"

"Just this—how much proof does a member of the *Royal Canadian Mounted Police* need before he puts a pair of killers under arrest?"

IV

GRADY met the man's eyes. He wondered how much Heflin knew and how much he merely had guessed. Marthe knew he was a Mountie because either she or Jan Beaudin had found his badge, but there was no way Heflin could be sure. Not unless there had been some contact between the two.

Grady spoke in a cool voice, "What gives you the idea I might be a Mountie? There's placer gold in these valley gravels and we both know it. I'm a prospector and I'm after it, just like I told you."

"Oh come now, Williams, I'm not a fool. I'm able to judge men as I told you that first day. I knew you were no prospector then. I took you for a Mountie, and so I played along with you. I wanted you to come out here and straighten out this business."

"And so you followed to give me a hand!"

"Yes, partly. It's to my interest to open the valley up."

"*How* is it?"

Heflin shrugged, "I'm a businessman. More mining means more money coming to the camp or Porcupine, and if more money comes I'll get my share. Also, in case you've forgotten, I'm a tax-paying citizen of the Dominion and I'd like to see malefactors brought to justice."

"Why did you kill that man three mornings ago?"

Heflin started forward, then paused. His eyes were narrowed a trifle, but still he held himself in check.

"You mean Clint Pound?"

"I don't know his name."

"We had nothing to do with his death.

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He was shot from ambush—by Jan Beaudin." Heflin smiled. "Oh, come on fellow! I've been frank with you. We can help each other. You're a mounted policeman and you talked with the girl. She gave you a cock-and-bull story implicating me and probably all the others. You believed her. It's easy to believe a pretty girl. I was young once and I know, but you're about to make one hell of a mistake—and that would be too bad for you as well as all the rest of us. Come on and lay your cards face up. Admit you're a Mountie."

Heflin wasn't sure about his being with the mounted, otherwise he would not have been so insistent on gaining an admission.

Grady shook his head, "You made a poor guess. I'm just what I said I was—a prospector."

Heflin moved suddenly, sending a sidelong glance at the halfbreed, Chastee. Chastee spat out the sodden end of his cigarette and stood up. He held his Winchester by its barrel, dragging the stock behind him.

"You fellows go ahead and talk," he grunted. "I'm thirsty."

He started away, then he stopped, grinning down on Grady.

"But maybe this man of the police he's afraid for shoot-in-back, hey?" With a flourish he took his hand from the rifle, allowing it to fall to earth. "I'll leave gun. Can't bushwack man without gun, hey?"

Grady said nothing. He did not even glance at him. He stayed as he was, hunkered on his heels, facing Heflin, but he kept Castee in the corner of his eye as he walked away with a sneaking, lynxlike glide on his quill-worked moccasins.

Chastee reached a turn in the trail twenty-five or thirty steps away where water trickled over moss-encrusted rocks. The ground sloped off and Grady could no longer see him.

He drew out his watch, snapping open the hunter case. He did not even notice where the hands stood. He looked at the polished crystal and saw the area behind him sharply reflected in miniature, like seeing it the wrong way through a telescope.

No movement for a few seconds, then he saw the reflection of Chastee who had doubled back in the cover of some bushes. The halfbreed paused, one hand beneath his mackinaw.

"What time is it?" Heflin asked.

The words reached Grady's ears a meaningless sound. He was too intent on the image in his watch crystal. Heflin waited a few second for an answer, then his heavy lips twisted into a smile and he said,

"Maybe it's later than you think, like it says on the sundial."

"What do you mean?" Grady asked.

"Nothing."

Chastee's hand came from beneath his mackinaw, holding a heavy revolver. He held the gun as though appraising its weight, its barrel angled up. Then slowly he brought it to aim...

Grady spun, diving to earth, striking with left arm outflung. He twisted over, aiming the rifle one-handed, using his knee as a prop. Chastee's revolver and the 30-30 rifle pounded at the same instant.

Grady's catlike movement had been unexpected. Chastee's bullet went wide by three or four feet. Grady didn't know whether his own bullet had found its mark.

He rolled over again and sprang to the protection of a small tree trunk.

MEN were scattering. Chastee slumped forward, stumbling through underbrush, pistol dangling in his fingers. He went face foremost in knee-high ferns. Grady looked for Heflin and saw him disappearing behind a boulder.

Heflin tossed up his rifle and fired, but he was on the move, and the bullet tore a four-inch fragment of bark at arm's reach above Grady's head.

Grady zig-zagged from cover of the tree, leaped behind another, and another as bullets rattled the branches around him.

He dived face foremost into a long, shallow depression backed by a steep, rock-faced bank.

He lay there, safe for the moment, and replaced the spent cartridge in his rifle. Then he bellied to the edge of the depression, and lifted his head.

A bullet buzzed close to his cheek and plopped against the bank behind him. He slid back.

Back of him the rock-faced bank shut off escape. It was fourteen or sixteen feet high, almost vertical, climbing it would be suicide. To right and left the depression

wandered for a distance of thirty paces and then leveled off until it lacked the depth necessary to cover the escape of a cottontail rabbit.

He was in a pocket, and the only thing left for him to do was sit tight and shoot it out.

He counted his ammunition. He had fourteen 30-30's in addition to the six in the magazine and one in the barrel, making a total of twenty-one. In addition he had the five cartridges, filling all except the suicide chamber in his six-shooter. Used cautiously and with a generous quantity of luck, they would last through the day.

His chief danger was that someone would sneak around and take him from the crest of the bank.

The forest air was fragrant of morning, and the rising sun was driving away the mist which had settled during the night. A couple of whisky-jacks flitted back and forth balancing on spruce twigs, scolding at something below, so he assumed that at least one of Heflin's men was there.

He moved along the depression for a distance of thirty or forty feet to where a large block of granite rose from the ground. He rose to a kneeling position. A bullet struck, spattering rock fragments that stung his neck and cheek.

A faint wisp of powdersmoke drifted up, but Grady did not dare show himself. Another rifle sounded—this one from the opposite direction. Heflin's 30-40 Krag, by the crack of it. The soft-nose bullet left a spot of white a couple inches from the boulder's top.

They knew his approximate position, and were shooting to keep him down. The real business would come from elsewhere.

He sat down with his shoulders pressed against the boulder, grimly rolled a cigarette and lighted. He smoked it down to his fingers, watching for grass-tremble.

A rifle whanged from a new direction. Another.

There was a moment while echoes bounded off among mountain crags; then there were four or five shots so close together that a single second would cover them.

A man was crashing dry brush, crawling to safety. Silence returned—silence

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that was very intense. Even the whisky-jacks had stopped scolding. Grady could hear the rapid tick-tick of the watch in his shirt pocket.

From over the bank he heard a voice calling his name.

"Grady! Where are you?"

It was Marthe.

"Here."

"You're all right?"

"Yes."

"I think you can make it up here all right."

He crawled along the depression for a dozen yards, then he rose quickly and made the crest of the bank with three leaping strides.

Bullets dug rock pellets at his heels. He fell face foremost to the grass cover. A gun spoke right in front of him. He had a glimpse of Marthe's face behind a fallen tree trunk. He ran bent over, dove to the protection of the log beside her, and lifted himself to peer at the area of forest below. Heflin's men were hidden there someplace but he could not see them.

"Stay down!" she whispered in a tense voice.

She knelt, stuffing cartridges into the magazine of her rifle.

"We can't stay here," said Grady.

"We can't leave *him.*"

Grady hadn't noticed before. Jan Beaudin, the black-whiskered man, lay on his side, half concealed by weeds.

Beaudin lifted himself on his left arm. His other arm hung limply on the earth. A bullet had torn through his chest. His flannel shirt was sponging full of blood.

Beaudin lay without speaking as Grady approached in the shelter of the log, his eyes burning and suspicious.

"Are you able to crawl?" Grady asked.

"Of course I can!" he half-snarled.

"Then get moving. Once you're in the cover of those jackpines I'll be able to give you a hand."

"The devil with you! I'll stay here and fight it out. Save yourselves, the two of you. I'd only be a handicap." His eyes rested on the girl, and a fleeting, gentle expression crossed his powerful face. "That's what I've always been and always will be—a handicap. It would have been better if I'd been shot eight years ago."

"Get going!" snapped Grady.

The man's lips twisted. "Why, Mountie? So you can get me outside and put a hangrope around my neck?"

"I have no hangrope for you. I want to get you out to save your life. Then I'll come back and get some real candidates for a hangrope."

Jan Beaudin twisted over, his hands groping for the rifle that had fallen in the weeds. He clawed the rotting bark of the log, rising, levering a cartridge into the barrel. His head appeared, and two rifles barked below, one of the bullets tearing out a big chunk of rotted wood and sending it whirring away. But he did not flinch. He fired, pumped the lever again, and would have stayed there, shooting like a suicide if Grady had not jerked him back.

"Stay down!" He glanced over at the girl. "Go with him, Marthe. Wait for me among the jackpines."

Marthe reached Beaudin's side, passing her slim arm around his shoulders.

"Jan!" she whispered. "Please, Jan."

He allowed her to help him along, crawling painfully, his right arm dragging and useless.

GRADY crept to the notch where a large branch had forked away from the log. He slid the rifle barrel over, pressed his cheek to the stock, scanned the stretch of forest below. Half a minute ticked by without his intent eyes catching a sign of movement.

Marthe called his name. He slid down and bellied rapidly across the ground. In the jackpines Beaudin was on the ground, weak from loss of blood. His eyes were half open, watching in a glazed manner as Marthe tore strips of white fabric from her underskirt to make bandages.

Grady took them and formed packs for the two sides of the wound, and bound them tightly around chest and shoulder.

"Don't bother with me!" Beaudin whispered. "The two of you."

Grady didn't even answer. He handed his rifle to Marthe, grabbed Beaudin's good arm, passing it around his shoulder. He stood, giving the big man a boost that lifted him from the ground.

"Walk!" Grady hissed.

He started away, and Beaudin, too badly wounded to struggle, walked with him.

"How far is the river?" Grady asked.

"About four miles," the girl answered.

"Do you have a canoe cached somewhere?"

"Yes."

The thick forest had closed on them, hiding them from Heflin and his men. Marthe kept trying to help Grady with Beaudin's weight.

"Watch for Heflin!" Grady said through set teeth.

It was level going for a while, then it was necessary to cut around in a wide quarter-circle, climbing part way up a hillside to avoid an area of fallen timber. They found a little, V-shaped gulch and waded down the shallow stream in its bottom because it was easier than trying to walk on the timbered slope above.

Jan Beaudin kept losing blood. He was weaker than when they started, but his legs moved in a sleep-walker's manner, bearing some of his weight.

"How far?" Grady asked over his shoulder.

"We're half way," Marthe answered.

Grady's ankle commenced paining from the strain of Beaudin's weight. He set his teeth and resolved to make it hold out till he reached the river. He wanted to get Marthe and Beaudin out to safety before returning for a show-down with Heflin.

Afterward, the last half of the journey was never quite clear in his mind. He simply walked for what seemed an eternity, then unexpectedly found himself stumbling ankle-deep in the swift-flowing water of the Nord.

Marthe pulled him back, her hand on the sleeve of his mackinaw, "It's here. Under this brush."

He lowered Beaudin to the spongy bank. Marthe had dropped the rifles and was flinging armloads of dry brush aside, revealing a home-made canue, or pirogue, which had been made by hollowing a cottonwood trunk.

He helped her drag it to the water.

Beaudin was conscious. "Where's my gun?" he asked, groping along the ground.

"We had to leave it behind."

Grady handed him his revolver. Beaudin managed to get to his feet. He splashed toward the pirogue, wading shin-deep,

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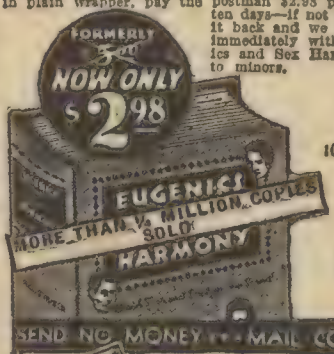

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fending off Grady's attempts to assist. He fell, clutching the side of the pirogue, and pulled himself over the edge, ending face down in its bottom.

A few seconds later Grady pushed the pirogue into the current. It rode swiftly just outside a brushy wall of willow and cottonwood bordering the stream.

For a quarter-mile the brush gave them hiding. The brush then ended and there was a long stretch of rocky shore with clean-growing spruce forest beyond.

Grady half expected a volley of shots at the moment they appeared, but seconds strung out one after another until a quarter-mile was covered.

There was a bend, a swirl around a projecting rock, a miniature shoot. The pirogue was heavy, its shape ungainly and it rode deep and was difficult to manage, but they navigated the tricky bit of water well enough.

After five minutes Grady paid little attention to the shore. They were temporarily beyond the area where Heflin could intercept them. The real danger spot lay at the head of the valley for the river flowed in a wide arc, like an Indian's bow bent to the breaking point. Heflin might decide to cut across the valley to lay an ambush at the narrows.

A gun rocked the air, bounding with a ringing sound across the water. A high-velocity bullet slit the river surface a paddle's length away. Grady peered back into the reflection of early sunshine which turned the river to a white glare. With difficulty he made out the dark shape of a pursuing canoe about two hundred yards away.

Marthe laid down her paddle reaching for a rifle, but Beaudin jerked it from her hands. He noticed it was the .44 Winchester and cursed, dropping it, and instead took Grady's 30-30 which was capable of carrying up a good deal further.

He propped the gun across the pirogue's rough gunwale, aimed briefly, and pulled the trigger. Painfully he forced his arm down, working the lever, aimed and shot again.

The canoe was still coming on, closing the distance swiftly. Beaudin was troubled by the glare and by weakness from loss of blood. His bullets were pretty wild. Grady took another look at the canoe. Two men were in it, and it was less than a hundred and fifty yards away.

He dipped his paddle again, leaning on it with greater vigor, trying to urge the pirogue faster, but it rode like the log that it was.

Beaudin kept firing the 30-30 until it was dry. He lay for a while, head down, rubbing sweat from his eyes. Every shot had been a clean miss.

"Cartridges!" Beaudin muttered.

V

GRADY interrupted the swing of his paddle to toss a handful back to him. The big man poked them in the magazine.

A bullet thudded the pirogue with an impact that made it bob slightly in the water. A rifle ka-whack from up the river came an instant later.

"Get down!" Grady hissed at the girl.

"No!" There was defiance in her voice.

He seized her and flung her to the bottom. He looked for the 30-30, but Beaudin still had it. He grabbed up the .44 Winchester.

He lifted the gun just as a bullet buzzed from a new direction. A report bounded from shore. Another slug hammered the pirogue just above waterline.

Two of Heflin's men had taken the shortcut across the valley and were cached on the right-hand shore.

He scanned the shore and the steep bank rising from it. Gunshine glimmered in the morning sun.

He lifted the rifle, saw the knife-edge front sight bob into line, and pressed the trigger.

The man sprang from the boulder that was half protecting him and fell face forward, his rifle clattering down the rocks. It was Jack Brown, the dirty-whiskered fellow who had made the joke about shaking hands that morning.

The other man fired once more, but Brown's death must have unnerved him. His bullet was a dozen feet wide.

Grady spotted him and shot. The bullet must have come close for he sprang to the protection of a large granite block.

The pirogue was caught in a cross-current with the rapids roaring just ahead. The craft drifted at an off-angle, threatening to swamp. Marthe was on her knees,

bending her paddle, trying to maneuver it to the left-hand channel.

The canoe was close now, scarcely fifty yards away, and it too was bounding in the first grasp of the rapids. Grady glimpsed its two occupants—Heflin in the bow and Brandt behind him. They had dropped their rifles and were paddling desperately.

Grady seized a paddle. A rock was speeding for the bottom of the pirogue. He tried to swing the craft to one side and at least take a glancing blow. The rock came straight on, driving itself in the pirogue's bottom. The craft rolled with a suddenness that sent the girl sprawling and made Grady steady himself on the gunwale. It hung for a second, swinging with foam rolling over its side.

It slipped off the rock and drifted downstream. A hole the size of a man's fist had been punched through, and water was geysering in.

Marthe fell on it, pressing the palms of her hands to check the flow.

Grady managed to bring the craft around. It still rode on an even keel.

HEFLIN'S canoe was more maneuverable. It had responded like a trained animal, bounding with light buoyancy over cross-currents, escaping rocks that would have smashed the pirogue to slivers.

The canoe reached the left channel, and for a few seconds there was only a smooth swell of water ahead of it.

Heflin saw his chance. He dropped his paddle and lifted his rifle.

A scant thirty yards separated them. Grady could see the deadly, round mubble of the Krag, the equally deadly eyes of Heflin behind it.

There was not a chance. No time even to reach for the .44. He waited the bullet's impact.

A gunshot hammered almost in his ear. Beaudin had forced himself to a sitting position, the 30-30 at his shoulder.

Heflin was hit. He fell, hanging for a second on the canoe's gunwale before going overboard.

The other man—Brandt—stared at the rifle in Beaudin's hand. Terror twisted his face. He commenced swinging his paddle like a madman, flinging spray from its

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blade as he tried to turn the canoe toward the rocky shore.

Beaudin worked the lever, pulling the trigger once more. The hammer snapped —empty. Brandt didn't know. He still fought for shore. The canoe was in swift water, angled wrong.

A crosscurrent grabbed it. A rock struck its side, smashing through fabric and ribs. It turned over slowly and floated, capsized, its red-painted bottom gleaming in the morning sun.

The thunder of rapids drifted away, and the pirogue drifted heavily across the choppy little waves of a pool dug from rock by swift waters beyond the narrow valley entrance.

It grated against a gravel bottom. Grady waded out, pulling it to shore.

The matches were dry inside their metal box. He built a fire, dug a hole, and boiled water with red-hot stones. He boiled bits of cloth and bathed Beaudin's wound.

The big man was weak but resting easily when afternoon came.

"You saved my life," he said, smiling weakly. "Why should a Mountie save a man's life just to let his superiors hang him?"

"I told you I wasn't taking you out to hang. That is, I'm not if you didn't murder Matt Reegas eight years ago like Heflin said you did."

Beaudin shook his head. "No. Heflin killed him during a quarrel. I knew it and tried to save him. Heflin was my partner, you know. I offered to help him escape over the Alaskan border. We started together, but the second morning I woke up and he was gone. He'd left me there, doubled back to Porcupine, and told everyone I'd skipped out. He had a couple of men—that halfbreed, Chastee, and a fellow named Pound—both of them were ready to swear that I was guilty.

"So I came to this valley. They were calling it the Vallon du Mort even then on account of two prospectors who had disappeared the year before. I found they'd accidentally blown themselves up setting a charge of dynamite.

"I wanted to be left alone. I told myself I hated the world and everyone in it. Whenever a prospector came, I managed to scare him out. Rolled a rock or dropped a tree across his camp while he was gone. Then Heflin found out there was gold in here. He decided to drive me out. When Olson and Jorgenson came in to prospect, he sent his gunmen in and murdered them. He wanted the police to come in after me —to do what he was afraid to do himself."

"Why did you set that bear trap for me?"

"That was foolish. I can see that now. But I knew you were a Mountie the second I saw your lean-to. I wanted to drive you out, wound you if necessary, but not kill you. So I set the trap."

Grady was looking at Marthe.

"She's not my wife, of course," said Beaudin. "She said she was trying to protect me. She had it planned to say that Jan Beaudin was dead. That I was her husband; that I married her in Vancouver."

Grady had suspected something like that, but Beaudin's words sent a surge of elation through him. He turned. Marthe was smiling at him. She came close and stood with her shoulder pressing his arm.

Beaudin went on, "Marthe was in school at Vancouver when I came here. I got out a couple of times, crossing to Alaska to send her some gold I'd panned. But I always came back. I felt safer here. Then she came. I didn't want her to, but after she did I couldn't send her away. It's not good to be alone.

Grady said, "I suppose Heflin suspected I was a Mountie when he grubstaked me. Then he sneaked in to see how I was coming along. He found out I'd talked to Marthe and that scared him. The second I got suspicious of the truth I'd be too smart to live. And that dead man at their camp —you didn't ambush him?"

"No."

Pound's death was something that could be cleared up when Reynolds, that escaped ambusher, was captured.

"There's gold here," Beaudin went on. "Millions in placer gold, if a man wants to dig for it. If it hadn't been for the gold, Heflin would probably have forgotten about my being here."

But Grady scarcely heard him. He was not interested in gold—not all the gold from Nome to Forty-Mile with the lovely dark eyes of Marthe Beaudin looking up at him.

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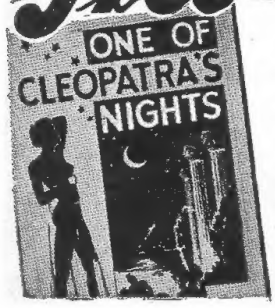

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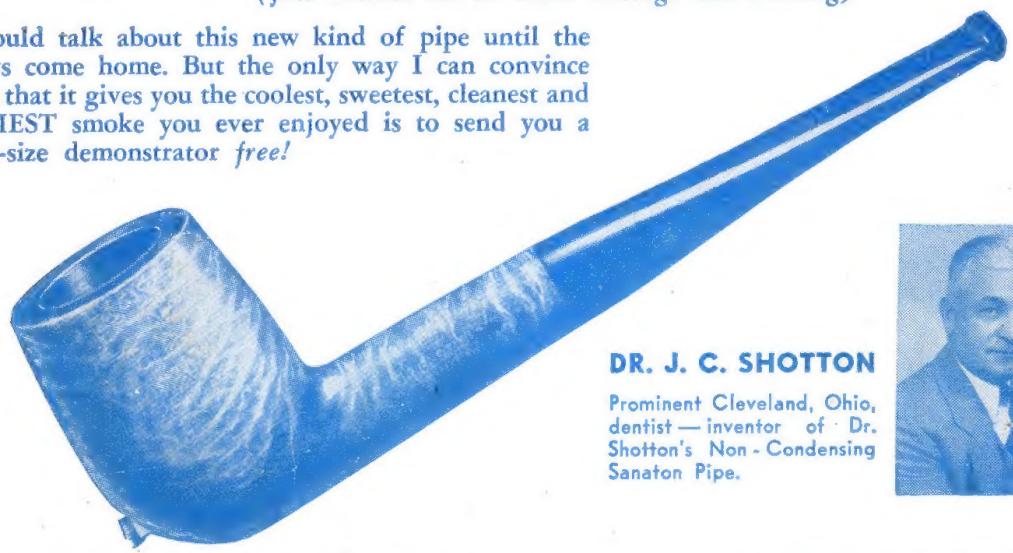

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MARK FOSTER, Dept. DH-101
257 Fourth Ave., New York 10, N. Y.

Dear Mark: Please send me one of your Sanaton demonstrator pipes (I am enclosing 10c to cover postage and handling), and reserve a genuine Aged Imported Briar Sanaton for me in the size and grade checked below. If I don't like the way the demonstrator smokes, I will cancel my reservation within two weeks—otherwise send it to me and I will pay the postman for it (plus few cents postage) when it arrives. (Check one box in each column.)

☐ Regular, $2.50	☐ Small bowl
☐ De Luxe, $3.75	☐ Medium bowl
☐ Sterling, $5.00	☐ Large bowl

Name.....

Address.....

City, Zone, State .....

NOTE: If you want your genuine briar Sanaton at once, enclose remittance and I'll send it along with the demonstrator, prepaid. Smoke the demonstrator—and if you don't like it, return the genuine briar Sanaton unsmoked for refund. For your courtesy in remitting with coupon, I will include a big bunch of extra long pipe cleaners free.